

# INFINITE PATHS TO INFINITE REALITY

*Sri Ramakrishna & Cross-Cultural  
Philosophy of Religion*

AYON MAHARAJ

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Ayon Maharaj

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তিনি অন , পথও অন ।

— রামকৃ

*God is infinite, and the paths to God are infinite.*

—Sri Ramakrishna



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"Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa's Philosophy of Vijñāna Vedānta," *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 21.1 (2017): 25–54. Copyright © 2017 by Springer Science + Business Media Dordrecht. Reprinted with permission of Springer.

"'God Is Infinite, and the Paths to God Are Infinite': A Reconstruction and Defense of Sri Ramakrishna's *Vijñāna*-Based Model of Religious Pluralism," *Journal of Religion* 97.2 (2017): 181–213. Copyright © 2017 by The University of Chicago. Reprinted with permission of The University of Chicago.

Finally, I offer this book, with all its imperfections, to Sri Ramakrishna:

कृ करोति कलुषं कुहका कारि  
शिवं सुविमलं तव नाम नाथ ।

## A NOTE ON SANSKRIT AND BENGALI TRANSLITERATION

Throughout the book, I transliterate Sanskrit words using the standard International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration scheme. I often add hyphens between individual words within a compound word (*samāsa*), in order to facilitate comprehension and to indicate how I interpret occasionally ambiguous compound words. For instance, I render *anekaviśeṣaṇaviśiṣṭa* as *aneka-viśeṣaṇa-viśiṣṭa*.

There is no standard transliteration scheme for Bengali, so I have adopted the scheme that I think will be most helpful to my expected readers. Whenever possible, I transliterate Sanskritic Bengali words in such a way that the Sanskrit root words are easily identifiable by those who have some knowledge of Sanskrit but little or no knowledge of Bengali. For instance, I render the Bengali word *bijñān*—which was frequently used by Sri Ramakrishna—as *viññāna*, and I render *bidyā* as *vidyā*. By contrast, I phonetically transliterate other Bengali words such as *ekhānkār* and *bujhechi*.

Throughout the book, I do not use diacritics when referring to Sri Ramakrishna, since this spelling of his name is already familiar. Moreover, I cite the names of Indian authors in exactly the way the authors themselves wrote their names. For instance, I refer to “Swami Tapasyananda” instead of “Svāmī Tapasyānanda,” since Swami Tapasyananda printed his name in his books without diacritics. However, I always use diacritics when citing the names of authors of texts in an Indian language such as Bengali or Sanskrit. For instance, I refer to “Svāmī Dhīreśānanda” as the author of several Bengali articles.



## ABBREVIATIONS OF TEXTS

Throughout this book, whenever I cite a passage from Mahendranāth Gupta's *Śrīśrīrāmakṛṣṇakathāmṛta*, I use parenthetical citations in the body of the text, first citing the page number of the Bengali text (abbreviated as *K*) and then citing the page number of Swami Nikhilananda's English translation, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* (abbreviated as *G*). I sometimes modify Swami Nikhilananda's translation.

Whenever I cite a passage from Svāmī Sāradānanda's biography of Sri Ramakrishna, *Śrīśrīrāmakṛṣṇalīlāprasaṅga*, I also use parenthetical citations in the body of the text, first citing the volume number, fascicle number, and page number of the Bengali text (abbreviated as *LP*) and then citing the page number of Swami Chetanananda's single-volume English translation (abbreviated as *DP*). I sometimes modify Swami Chetanananda's translation.

*K* Mahendranāth Gupta, *Śrīśrīrāmakṛṣṇakathāmṛta: Śrīma-kathita*. 1 vol. Kolkata: Udbodhan, [1902–32] 2010.

*G* Mahendranath Gupta, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*. Translated by Swami Nikhilananda. New York: Ramakrishna-Vedanta Center, [1942] 1992.

*LP* Svāmī Sāradānanda, *Śrīśrīrāmakṛṣṇalīlāprasaṅga*. 2 vols. Kolkata: Udbodhan, [1909–19] 2009. Volume 1 contains three separately paginated fascicles, and Volume 2 contains two separately paginated fascicles.

*DP* Swami Saradananda, *Sri Ramakrishna and His Divine Play*. Translated by Swami Chetanananda. St. Louis: Vedanta Society of St. Louis, 2003.





INFINITE PATHS TO INFINITE REALITY



## INTRODUCTION

*One can write shelves of philosophical books based on any one of Sri Ramakrishna's teachings.*

—SWAMI VIVEKANANDA<sup>1</sup>

What can contemporary philosophers and theologians learn from a nineteenth-century Indian mystic? This book proposes that Sri Ramakrishna (1836–1886), an unlettered Bengali sage, has much to teach us. He is best known for having affirmed the harmony of all religions on the basis of his own richly varied mystical experiences and eclectic religious practices, both Hindu and non-Hindu. His spiritual journey culminated in the exalted state of “*vijñāna*,” his term for the “intimate knowledge” of God as the Infinite Reality that is both personal and impersonal, with and without form, immanent in the universe and beyond it. Sri Ramakrishna’s expansive spiritual standpoint of *vijñāna*, I argue, opens up a new paradigm for addressing central issues in the philosophy of religion.

Although Sri Ramakrishna never presented a systematic philosophy, his recorded oral teachings in Bengali address a wide range of philosophical issues and draw on numerous Indian philosophical traditions. To date, however, surprisingly few books have been devoted to Sri Ramakrishna’s philosophy. In Bengali, the only sustained examination of Sri Ramakrishna’s philosophy is Svāmī Prajñānānanda’s eight-volume study.<sup>2</sup> In English, there are a number of book-length historical and psychobiographical studies of Sri Ramakrishna, but there is

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1. *LPI*.iii.1 / *DP* 387.

2. Svāmī Prajñānānanda, *Vāñi o Vicār: Śrī Rāmākṛṣṇa Kathāmṛter Vyākhyā Viśeṣan*, 8 vols. (Kolkata: Sri Ramakrishna Vedanta Math, 1974–95). In chapter 1, I argue that Prajñānānanda’s study, while important, has major limitations—the most serious one being his overeagerness to fit all of Sri Ramakrishna’s philosophical teachings into the sectarian framework of Advaita Vedānta.

not a single academic book on Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical views.<sup>3</sup> However, several scholars—including Satis Chandra Chatterjee, Swami Tapasyananda, and Jeffery D. Long—have written insightful articles and book chapters on different aspects of Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy.<sup>4</sup> Building on their work, I have ventured to write the first scholarly book in English on Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy.

There are three primary reasons why Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy deserves a book-length treatment. First, his philosophical views, as original as they are sophisticated, constitute a significant—if neglected—chapter in the history of Indian philosophical thought. Second, Sri Ramakrishna's teachings influenced some of the most important figures in modern Indian thought, including Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo, Rabindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi, and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan.<sup>5</sup> Thus, a careful study of Sri Ramakrishna's

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3. Historical studies of Sri Ramakrishna include Amiya P. Sen's two books, *Ramakrishna Paramahansa: The Sadhaka of Dakshineswar* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2010), and *Three Essays on Sri Ramakrishna and His Times* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 2001). Psychobiographical studies of Sri Ramakrishna include Carl Olson, *The Mysterious Play of Kālī: An Interpretive Study of Rāmākṛṣṇa* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1990); Narasingha Sil, *Rāmākṛṣṇa Paramahansa: A Psychological Profile* (Leiden: Brill, 1991); Narasingha Sil, *Ramakrishna Revisited: A New Biography* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1998); Jeffrey Kripal, *Kālī's Child: The Mystical and the Erotic in the Life and Teachings of Sri Ramakrishna* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004). Such psychobiographical studies of Sri Ramakrishna are based on highly controversial, and culturally specific, psychoanalytic assumptions that tend to distort, rather than illuminate, Sri Ramakrishna's life and teachings. For an incisive critique of psychobiographical approaches to Sri Ramakrishna, see Swami Tyagananda and Pravrajika Vrajaprana, *Interpreting Ramakrishna: Kālī's Child Revisited* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2010).

4. See, for instance, Walter Neevel, "The Transformation of Śrī Rāmākṛṣṇa," in *Hinduism: New Essays in the History of Religions*, ed. B. L. Smith (Leiden: Brill, 1976), 53–97; Freda Matchett, "The Teaching of Rāmākṛṣṇa in Relation to the Hindu Tradition and as Interpreted by Vivekānanda," *Religion* 11 (1981), 171–84; Satis Chandra Chatterjee, *Classical Indian Philosophies: Their Synthesis in the Philosophy of Sri Ramakrishna*, 2nd ed. (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, [1963] 1985), 104–52; Swami Tapasyananda, *Sri Ramakrishna's Thoughts in a Vedantic Perspective* (Mylapore, India: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1993); Arindam Chakrabarti, "The Dark Mother Flying Kites: Sri Ramakrishna's Metaphysics of Morals," *Sophia* 33.3 (1994), 14–29; Swami Bhajanananda, "Philosophy of Sri Ramakrishna," *University of Calcutta Journal of the Department of Philosophy* 9 (2010), 1–56; Jeffery D. Long, "Advaita and Dvaita: Bridging the Gap—the Ramakrishna Tradition's both/and Approach to the Dvaita/Advaita Debate," *Journal of Vaishnava Studies* 16.2 (Spring 2008), 49–70.

5. For a discussion of the influence of Sri Ramakrishna on Sri Aurobindo, see Ayon Maharaj, "Toward a New Hermeneutics of the *Bhagavad Gītā*: Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Aurobindo, and the Secret of *Vijñāna*," *Philosophy East and West* 65.4 (October 2015), 1214–17. Tagore offers a paean to Sri Ramakrishna in his 1936 speech, "Address at the Parliament of Religions," in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, vol. 4, ed. Sisir Kumar Das and Nityapriya Ghosh (Kolkata: Sahitya Akademi, 2008), 957–65. Gandhi remarks on Sri Ramakrishna in the foreword to Swami Nikhilananda, *Life of Sri Ramakrishna* (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, [1928] 2008), ix. Radhakrishnan was influenced by Sri Ramakrishna primarily through his encounter with Swami Vivekananda's work. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, "Swami Vivekananda and Young India," *Prabuddha Bharata* 68.5 (May 1963), 183–84.

philosophy enriches our understanding of modern India's complex intellectual landscape. Third, Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical positions resonate strongly with cutting-edge work in Western philosophy of religion, thereby inviting cross-cultural philosophical inquiry. On the one hand, considering Sri Ramakrishna in the light of recent Western philosophy helps bring out the rigor and force of his views. On the other, Sri Ramakrishna's remarkably expansive conception of God as the impersonal-personal Infinite Reality provides a powerful alternative to the more narrowly theistic paradigm of many Western philosophers and theologians. Therefore, contemporary scholars stand to learn a great deal from Sri Ramakrishna's fresh and capacious perspective on a variety of philosophical problems.

Methodologically, this book combines detailed exegesis with cross-cultural philosophical investigation. My exegetical aim is to provide accurate and charitable reconstructions of Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical views on the basis of his recorded oral teachings. Throughout this book, I rely primarily on two Bengali source-texts for information on Sri Ramakrishna's life and teachings. Without a doubt, Mahendranāth Gupta's *Śrīśrīrāmakṛṣṇakathāmṛta* (1902–32; hereafter *Kathāmṛta*)—which was later translated into English as *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*—is the most reliable and comprehensive source of Sri Ramakrishna's teachings.<sup>6</sup> Gupta, who frequently visited Sri Ramakrishna between 1882 and 1886, recorded with almost stenographic accuracy Sri Ramakrishna's conversations with his numerous visitors.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, many of Sri Ramakrishna's intimate disciples, including his wife Sārādā Devī and Swami Vivekananda, attested to the faithfulness and precision of Gupta's work.<sup>8</sup> Of course, reconstructing Sri Ramakrishna's views on the basis of his oral teachings is far from straightforward.

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6. The literal meaning of *Śrīśrīrāmakṛṣṇakathāmṛta* is “The Nectar of Sri Ramakrishna's Words.” There are, of course, other collections of Sri Ramakrishna's teachings compiled by some of his other disciples, including Svāmī Brahmānanda's *Śrīśrīrāmakṛṣṇa Upadeśa* (Kolkata: Udbodhan, 1961) and Sureścandra Datta's *Śrīśrīrāmakṛṣṇadever Upadeśa* (Kolkata: Haramohan Publishing, 1968). I rely on Gupta's *Kathāmṛta* for three main reasons. First, it is the most accurate and extensive source of Sri Ramakrishna's teachings. Second, only the *Kathāmṛta* provides crucial information about the *context* of Sri Ramakrishna's teachings—such as whom he was addressing, where and when he spoke, and so on. Third, as far as I am aware, there are no substantial discrepancies in Sri Ramakrishna's recorded philosophical teachings across the various compilations. Therefore, for the purposes of this book, it has not been necessary for me to consult other compilations.

7. Gupta actually published his work in five volumes (in 1902, 1904, 1908, 1910, and 1932), each of which begins with entries from 1882 and ends with entries from 1886. See *Śrīśrīrāmakṛṣṇakathāmṛta: Śrīma-Kathita*, 5 vols. (Kolkata: Kathāmṛta Bhavan, 1902–32). The publisher Udbodhan later combined these five volumes into a single volume arranged in chronological order. Throughout this book, I refer to the single-volume Udbodhan edition of the *Kathāmṛta*.

8. See K v–vi for Swami Vivekananda's and Sārādā Devī's laudatory remarks about the accuracy of the *Kathāmṛta*.

Hence, in section II of chapter 1, I explain my hermeneutic procedure for reconstructing Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical positions from the *Kathāmṛta* as accurately as possible.

I will also refer frequently to the *Śrīśrīrāmakṛṣṇalīlāprasaṅga* (1909–19; hereafter *Līlāprasaṅga*), a detailed biography of Sri Ramakrishna written by his disciple Svāmī Sāradānanda.<sup>9</sup> The *Līlāprasaṅga* is an invaluable source-text, as it contains detailed and reliable accounts of Sri Ramakrishna's spiritual practices and mystical experiences not found in other texts, including the *Kathāmṛta*. At certain places in his biography, Svāmī Sāradānanda also offers his own interpretations of Sri Ramakrishna's spiritual practices, mystical experiences, and philosophical ideas. For the sake of historical accuracy, I will rely as much as possible on noninterpretive passages from the *Līlāprasaṅga*—in particular, accounts of incidents in Sri Ramakrishna's life and reports of his teachings and mystical experiences that are either in Sri Ramakrishna's own words or in the words of someone who was present with him at the time of the event in question.<sup>10</sup>

Throughout my book, the task of philosophical exegesis goes hand in hand with a broader cross-cultural project: bringing Sri Ramakrishna into dialogue with recent Western philosophers. As a contribution to the nascent field of cross-cultural philosophy of religion, this book participates in the recent movement away from comparative philosophy and toward more creative and flexible paradigms for engaging in philosophical inquiry across cultures.<sup>11</sup> These new methodological paradigms go by a variety of names, including “cross-cultural philosophy,”<sup>12</sup>

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9. The literal meaning of *Śrīśrīrāmakṛṣṇalīlāprasaṅga* is “The Divine Play of Sri Ramakrishna.”

10. Some scholars, such as Neevel (“The Transformation of Śrī Rāmākṛishna,” 67), claim that Sāradānanda had a bias toward Advaita Vedānta, which sometimes colored his account of Sri Ramakrishna's life and spiritual practices. However, Neevel still accepts the reliability of much of Sāradānanda's biography. Even if Neevel's objection is true, it would not vitiate my philosophical reconstructions, which are based on noninterpretive passages from Sāradānanda's work.

11. See Jonardon Ganeri's recent manifesto, “Why Philosophy Must Go Global,” comprising his two articles, “Manifesto for a Re:emergent Philosophy,” *Confluence* 4 (2016), 134–41, and “Reflections on Re:emergent Philosophy,” *Confluence* 4 (2016), 164–86; M. Kirloskar-Steinbach, Geeta Ramana, and J. Maffie, “Introducing *Confluence*: A Thematic Essay,” *Confluence* 1 (2014), 7–63; Ethan Mills, “From Comparative to Cross-Cultural Philosophy,” in *Comparative Philosophy Today and Tomorrow*, ed. Sarah Mattice, Geoff Ashton, and Joshua Kimber (New Castle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 120–28; Arindam Chakrabarti and Ralph Weber, eds., *Comparative Philosophy without Borders* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 1–33; Andrew Tuck, *Comparative Philosophy and the Philosophy of Scholarship: On the Western Interpretation of Nāgārjuna* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

12. Jay Garfield, *Empty Words: Buddhist Philosophy and Cross-Cultural Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), esp. viii; Mills, “From Comparative to Cross-Cultural Philosophy”; Thomas Dean, ed., *Religious Pluralism and Truth: Essays on Cross-Cultural Philosophy of Religion* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995).

“global philosophy,”<sup>13</sup> “fusion philosophy,”<sup>14</sup> “re:emergent philosophy,”<sup>15</sup> and “borderless philosophy.”<sup>16</sup> While these postcomparativist paradigms differ in subtle ways, they all share a fundamental commitment to drawing on the conceptual resources of numerous philosophical traditions in order to address philosophical problems.<sup>17</sup> As Jay Garfield admirably puts it, the goal of cross-cultural philosophy is “not so much to juxtapose texts from distinct traditions to notice similarities and differences as it is to do philosophy, with lots of texts, lots of perspectives, and lots of hermeneutical traditions—to make the resources of diverse traditions and their scholars available to one another and to create new dialogues.”<sup>18</sup>

My aim, then, is not to compare Sri Ramakrishna with Western philosophers but to shed new light on central problems in cross-cultural philosophy of religion by bringing Sri Ramakrishna into *creative dialogue* with recent Western thinkers. Along the way, I often draw comparisons between Sri Ramakrishna and numerous Western philosophers, but such comparisons are always in the service of cross-cultural philosophizing.

For reasons of space, this book engages primarily the work of recent analytic philosophers of religion, with the exception of a discussion of the Continental philosopher Jean-Luc Marion in chapter 2. Since Continental philosophy of religion is a rich and vast field in its own right, it would take an entirely different book to explore how Sri Ramakrishna could be brought into conversation with such Continental thinkers as Søren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger, Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, and Merold Westphal.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, since I aim for depth rather than comprehensive coverage, I focus on four topics in the philosophy of religion: the infinitude of God (chapters 1 and 2), religious pluralism (chapters 3

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13. Thom Brooks, “Philosophy Unbound: The Idea of Global Philosophy,” *Metaphilosophy* 44.3 (April 2013), 254–66.

14. Mark Siderits, *Personal Identity and Buddhist Philosophy: Empty Persons* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), xi.

15. Ganeri, “Manifesto for a Re:emergent Philosophy.”

16. Chakrabarti and Weber, *Comparative Philosophy without Borders*, 22.

17. As Michael Levine points out, some self-identified “comparative philosophers”—such as Eliot Deutsch and Levine himself—do engage in the kind of cross-cultural philosophical problem-solving that philosophers like Siderits consider to be *postcomparativist*. Levine, “Does Comparative Philosophy Have a Fusion Future?,” *Confluence* 4 (2016), 208–15. While I agree with Levine that comparative philosophy has often encompassed creative cross-cultural work, the label “comparative philosophy” is still misleading, since it foregrounds the narrow aim of comparison.

18. Garfield, *Empty Words*, viii.

19. An important book in Continental philosophy of religion is Merold Westphal’s *Overcoming Onto-Theology: Toward a Postmodern Christian Faith* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001).



and 4), the nature and epistemology of mystical experience (chapters 5 and 6), and the problem of evil (chapters 7 and 8).

Chapter 1 sets the stage by reconstructing Sri Ramakrishna's overall philosophical framework. Militating against narrow sectarian interpretations of Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical teachings, I argue that his philosophy is best characterized as "Vijñāna Vedānta," a resolutely nonsectarian worldview—rooted in his own mystical experience of *vijñāna*—that harmonizes apparently conflicting religious faiths, sectarian philosophies, and spiritual disciplines. I first delineate five interpretive principles that I employ throughout the book in order to reconstruct Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical views on the basis of the *Kathāmṛta*. I then elaborate the six main tenets of Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy of Vijñāna Vedānta. On the mystical basis of *vijñāna*, Sri Ramakrishna affirms that both the impersonal nondual Brahman of Advaitins and the loving personal God of theists are equally real aspects of one and the same Infinite Reality. The remaining seven chapters of this book explore the far-reaching philosophical implications of Sri Ramakrishna's unique standpoint of *vijñāna*.

Chapter 2 investigates the nature of divine infinitude from a cross-cultural perspective by bringing Sri Ramakrishna into conversation with classical Indian philosophers as well as Western philosophers and theologians. Sri Ramakrishna claims that God is "infinite" (*ananta*) in the sense that God's nature is an inexhaustible plenitude that exceeds the grasp of the finite human intellect. I identify what is distinctive in Sri Ramakrishna's conception of divine infinitude within the Indian philosophical context by comparing it with the Vedāntic views of the Advaitin Śaṅkara, the Viśiṣṭādvaitin Rāmānuja, and the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava Viśvanātha Cakravartin.

The remainder of the second chapter ventures into cross-cultural territory. First, I briefly identify some striking affinities between Sri Ramakrishna's *vijñāna*-based conception of the Infinite God and the medieval Christian theologian Nicholas of Cusa's doctrine of God as the *coincidentia oppositorum* ("coincidence of opposites"). I then bring Sri Ramakrishna into dialogue with the contemporary analytic theologian Benedikt Paul Göcke. According to Göcke, God is infinite in the radical sense that God is not subject to the law of contradiction and, therefore, should be analyzed in terms of "paraconsistent logic."<sup>20</sup> I contend that while Göcke's argument helps clarify the paraconsistent underpinnings of Sri Ramakrishna's own conception of the Infinite God, Sri Ramakrishna pursues the paraconsistent logic of divine infinitude more fully and consistently than does Göcke. Finally, I triangulate Sri Ramakrishna and Göcke with the

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20. Benedikt Paul Göcke, "The Paraconsistent God," in *Rethinking the Concept of a Personal God*, ed. Thomas Schärfl, Christian Tapp, and Veronika Wegener (Münster: Aschendorff, 2016), 177.

contemporary Continental philosopher Jean-Luc Marion. Marion's trenchant critique of various forms of "conceptual idolatry" and his positive account of God as *agape* resonate with Sri Ramakrishna's views on divine infinitude. At the same time, however, Sri Ramakrishna helps us see how both Göcke and Marion lapse into different forms of conceptual idolatry in their own right.

While it is well known that Sri Ramakrishna taught the harmony of all religions, scholars have interpreted his views on religious diversity in a number of conflicting ways. Chapter 3 argues that Sri Ramakrishna's spiritual standpoint of *viññāna* holds the key to understanding his nuanced position on religious diversity. In particular, I reconstruct from his teachings a unique, and philosophically sophisticated, model of religious pluralism. According to Sri Ramakrishna, since God is the impersonal-personal Infinite Reality, there are correspondingly infinite ways of approaching and realizing God. Therefore, all religions and spiritual philosophies—both theistic and nontheistic—are salvifically effective paths to one common goal: God-realization, or the direct spiritual experience of God in any of His innumerable forms or aspects. I then examine Sri Ramakrishna's response to the thorny problem of conflicting religious truth-claims. He reconciles religious claims about the nature of the ultimate reality on the basis of his capacious ontology of God. Every religion, he claims, captures a uniquely real aspect of the Infinite Reality. Regarding other types of religious truth-claims, he maintains that while every religion errs on some points of doctrine, these errors do not substantially diminish the salvific efficacy of religions. Finally, I defend Sri Ramakrishna's religious pluralism against numerous objections leveled by scholars such as R. W. Neufeldt and Ninian Smart.

Building on the third chapter, chapter 4 explores the British philosopher John Hick's early and late views on religious pluralism in the light of Sri Ramakrishna. Between 1970 and 1974, the early Hick espoused a Vedāntic theory of religious pluralism—based explicitly on Sri Aurobindo's "logic of the infinite"—that comes remarkably close to Sri Ramakrishna's *viññāna*-based pluralist model. According to the early Hick, the Infinite Divine Reality is both personal and impersonal, even though our finite minds are unable to grasp how this is possible. The early Hick derived a robust model of religious pluralism from this Aurobindonian premise of unfathomable divine infinitude: since each religion captures at least one true aspect of the Infinite Reality, the various conceptions of the Divine Reality taught by the major world religions are complementary rather than conflicting.

By 1976, however, Hick abandoned this Aurobindonian line of thought in favor of his now well-known quasi-Kantian theory of religious pluralism, according to which the personal and nonpersonal ultimates of the various world religions are different phenomenal forms of the same unknowable "Real *an sich*." As numerous critics have pointed out, Hick's quasi-Kantian pluralist model fails

to honor the self-understanding of most religious practitioners, who take their respective ultimates to be literally, and not merely phenomenally, true. On this basis, I argue that Sri Ramakrishna's *viññāna*-based model of religious pluralism, which grants full ontological reality to the personal and nonpersonal ultimates of the various religions, is more robust and philosophically viable than Hick's.

Chapter 5 draws upon Sri Ramakrishna's teachings and mystical testimony in order to develop a new conceptual framework for understanding the nature of mystical experience. In recent analytic philosophy of religion, two conflicting approaches to mystical experience have been especially influential: perennialism and constructivism. While perennialists such as Walter Stace and Evelyn Underhill maintain that mystical experiences are the same across cultures, constructivists such as Steven Katz and Hick claim that a mystic's cultural conditioning plays a major role in shaping his or her mystical experiences.

After identifying the strengths and limitations of these two positions, I argue that Sri Ramakrishna champions what I call a "manifestationist" approach to mystical experience that provides a compelling dialectical alternative to both perennialism and constructivism. In Sri Ramakrishna's view, "God manifests Himself in the form which His devotee loves most" (*K* 101 / *G* 149–50). From the standpoint of *viññāna*, Sri Ramakrishna asserts that mystics in various traditions experience different *real manifestations* of the same impersonal-personal Infinite Reality. Accordingly, while Sri Ramakrishna agrees with the constructivist view that a mystic's background beliefs are reflected in his or her mystical experiences, he rejects the epistemic subjectivism of constructivists like Katz and Hick. At the same time, Sri Ramakrishna takes the Infinite Reality to be the common ontological object of all mystical experience, but he rejects the reductive perennialist view that all mystical experiences are phenomenologically identical. Thus, I contend that Sri Ramakrishna's manifestationist paradigm provides a more accurate and nuanced account of mystical experience than those offered by many recent philosophers of religion.

Chapter 6 explores how Sri Ramakrishna's mystical testimony and teachings enrich contemporary philosophical debates about the epistemic value of mystical experience. These debates center on a key question: are we rationally justified in taking mystical experiences—either our own or those of others—to be veridical? After briefly outlining Sri Ramakrishna's views on the scope of theological reason, I consider whether he accepts the possibility of self-authenticating experiences of God—that is, experiences of God that guarantee their own veridicality to their epistemic subjects. Sri Ramakrishna's mystical testimony, I argue, lends strong support to the philosopher Robert Oakes's position that self-authenticating experiences of God are, indeed, logically possible.

The remainder of chapter 6 focuses on the argument from experience, which has been widely discussed by contemporary philosophers of religion—the

argument that it is reasonable to believe that God exists on the basis of the testimony of people claiming to have experienced Him. As we will see, Sri Ramakrishna defended a simple version of the argument from experience, and his teachings and mystical reports also support the fundamental premises of the more sophisticated versions defended by recent philosophers such as Richard Swinburne and Jerome Gellman. Moreover, I argue that Sri Ramakrishna's distinctive approach helps defuse two of the most serious objections to the argument from experience: first, that mystical experiences, unlike sensory experiences, cannot be adequately cross-checked; and second, that different mystics often make conflicting claims about the nature of the ultimate reality they allegedly experience.

Chapter 7 reconstructs Sri Ramakrishna's multifaceted response to the problem of evil. Several of Sri Ramakrishna's visitors argued that instances of apparently pointless evil—such as Genghis Khan's act of mass slaughter—make it reasonable to believe either that God does not exist or that God is omnipotent and omniscient but not perfectly good. Sri Ramakrishna answers that the ways of an omniscient and omnipotent God are inscrutable to the finite human intellect—a response, I argue, that is best understood as a skeptical theist position: in light of our cognitive limitations, we are never rationally justified in believing that God has no morally sufficient reason for permitting a given instance of evil.

Sri Ramakrishna's skeptical theism dovetails with a full-blown theodicy—a positive account of *why* God permits evil and suffering. By situating Sri Ramakrishna's theodicy in the context of the classical Vedāntic theodicies of Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja, I set its distinctive aspects into relief. According to Sri Ramakrishna, God permits evil “in order to create saints” (*K* 37 / *G* 98). On the basis of such teachings, I reconstruct what I call Sri Ramakrishna's “saint-making” theodicy: since God has created this world as an environment for saint-making, evil is as necessary as good. Through the experience of good and evil in the course of many lives, we gradually learn to combat our own evil tendencies and cultivate ethical and spiritual virtues that bring us closer to the goal of eternal salvation that awaits us all.

Finally, I discuss the crucial mystical dimension of Sri Ramakrishna's theodicy. His theodicy culminates in an appeal to his own panentheistic experience of *vijñāna*, which reveals to him that God has become everything in the universe. From this mystical standpoint, Sri Ramakrishna is able to resolve lingering problems raised by his saint-making theodicy: since God Himself sports in the guise of both evildoers and their victims, the problem of evil—which presupposes a difference between God and His suffering creatures—loses its urgency.

Chapter 8 adopts a cross-cultural approach to the problem of evil by bringing Sri Ramakrishna into conversation with recent philosophers. I begin by comparing Sri Ramakrishna's skeptical theism with William Alston's skeptical theist

refutation of William Rowe's argument from evil against God's existence. On the one hand, I draw upon Alston's skeptical theist response to Rowe as a means of developing and defending Sri Ramakrishna's own skeptical theist position. On the other, I argue that Alston's failure to consider Indian *karma*-based theodicies significantly weakens his argument.

I then bring Sri Ramakrishna's saint-making theodicy into dialogue with Hick's "soul-making" theodicy. Hick provides convincing arguments for the necessity of evil in a soul-making environment, which equally support Sri Ramakrishna's saint-making theodicy. Furthermore, Hick's "use of eschatology to complete theodicy"—his argument that a successful theodicy must accept the view that everyone will be saved—helps to clarify the importance of the doctrine of universal salvation in Sri Ramakrishna's own theodicy.<sup>21</sup> I argue, however, that Hick's soul-making theodicy also has major weaknesses, which stem from his Christian assumption of a one-life-only paradigm and his neglect of mystical experience. On this basis, I make the case that Sri Ramakrishna's mystically grounded saint-making theodicy, which presupposes rebirth, has significant philosophical advantages over Hick's theodicy.

Hopefully, this book will inspire scholars to explore further how Sri Ramakrishna's unique mystico-philosophical perspective can enrich contemporary discussions of a wide range of philosophical and theological issues. The book's broader polemical aim is to challenge the methodological parochialism of philosophy as it is often practiced in the Western world.<sup>22</sup> To remain vital, we must adopt a broader, and more rigorous, cross-cultural methodology that draws on the resources of both Western and non-Western philosophical traditions. Cross-cultural philosophizing, as I understand it, should be seen less as a niche activity of a tiny minority of philosophers than as a methodological imperative for *all* philosophers. The time has come for philosophers to go global.

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21. John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, [1966] 2010), 351.

22. For a spirited critique of the parochialism of contemporary Anglophone academic philosophy, see Bryan W. Van Norden's recent book, *Taking Back Philosophy: A Multicultural Manifesto* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).



# THE INFINITUDE OF GOD



Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical teachings—carefully recorded by Mahendranāth Gupta in the *Śrīśrīrāmakṛṣṇakathāmr̥ta* (hereafter *Kathāmr̥ta*)—have been a source of lively dialogue and debate among devotees and scholars throughout the world. His teachings on God and the universe, the meaning and purpose of human existence, and the various kinds of spiritual experience resonate with numerous Indian philosophical traditions, including Tantra, Advaita Vedānta, Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta, Dvaita Vedānta, and Bengal Vaiṣṇavism. Not surprisingly, it has proven extraordinarily difficult to determine Sri Ramakrishna's overall philosophical outlook.

Commentators from the late nineteenth century up to the present have adopted three main interpretive approaches to Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy. Many have interpreted Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical views in terms of a particular philosophical sect.<sup>1</sup> For instance, commentators such as Svāmī Ōmkārānanda, Svāmī Dhīreśānanda, and Dīnēś Bhaṭṭācārya argue that Advaita Vedānta was Sri Ramakrishna's ultimate standpoint.<sup>2</sup> By contrast, Mahendranāth Gupta claims that Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy comes closest to Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita

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1. Throughout this chapter, I use the words “sect” and “sectarian” in a strictly non-normative sense. The words “sect” and “sectarian” correspond roughly to the Sanskrit words *sampradāya* and *sāmpṛadāyika* respectively.

2. See Svāmī Ōmkārānanda, “*Brahma o Śakti abhed*,” *Udbodhan* 66.5 (1964), 227–32; Svāmī Ōmkārānanda, “*Nitya o Līlā*,” *Udbodhan* 66.6 (1964), 287–96; Svāmī Dhīreśānanda, “*Svāmī Vivekānanda o Advaitavāda*,” *Udbodhan* 65.2 (1962), 73–80 and 65.3 (1962), 80–81, 138–44; Svāmī Dhīreśānanda, “*Nānā Drṣṭite Śrīrāmakṛṣṇa*,” *Udbodhan* 82.5 (1980), 220–26; Dīnēś Bhaṭṭācārya, “*Darśan Cintāi Śāṅkara-Rāmānuja-Madhva-Śrīrāmakṛṣṇa*,” in *Viśvacetanāi Śrīrāmakṛṣṇa*, ed. Svāmī Prameyānanda et al. (Kolkata: Udbodhan, 1987), 594–609; Svāmī Prajñānānanda, *Vāṇī o Vicār: Śrīśrīrāmakṛṣṇakathāmr̥ter Vyākhyā o Viśleṣaṇ*, 5 vols. (Kolkata: Ramakrishna Vedanta Math, 1976–82).



(K 698).<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, scholars such as Heinrich Zimmer and Walter Neevel have suggested that Tāntrika philosophy provides the master framework for making sense of Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical teachings.<sup>4</sup>

Rejecting all such efforts to classify Sri Ramakrishna as the “flag bearer” of a particular sectarian school, Narasingha Sil argues that Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical views are unsystematic and even inconsistent, so the very attempt to derive *any* coherent philosophical position from his teachings is doomed to fail.<sup>5</sup> As Sil puts it, there is no “consistency in Ramakrishna's devotionism or spirituality because he was so enchantingly freewheeling in his god-consciousness.”<sup>6</sup>

Sil, in my opinion, too hastily assumes that there is no consistency or coherence in Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical views. On the other hand, sectarian attempts to pigeonhole Sri Ramakrishna's teachings into one particular philosophical school have tended to be Procrustean. Indeed, Sri Ramakrishna consciously

3. For helpful discussions of the extent to which Sri Ramakrishna could be considered a Viśiṣṭādvaitin, see Svāmī Prabhānanda, “*Kathāmṛte Śrīrāmākṛṣṇer Mat ki Viśiṣṭādvaitavāda?*” in *Svāmī Vivekānanda Smārak* (Kolkata: Bidhannagar Vivekananda Smarak Samity, 2012), 1–7, and Arvind Sharma, *Ramakrishna and Vivekananda: New Perspectives* (Bangalore: Sterling Publishers, 1989), 46–51.

4. Heinrich Zimmer, *Philosophies of India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), 560–602; Walter Neevel, “The Transformation of Śrī Rāmākṛishna,” in *Hinduism: New Essays in the History of Religions*, ed. B. L. Smith (Leiden: Brill, 1976), 53–97. Freda Matchett agrees with Neevel that Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy “can be understood much more appropriately in Tantric terms than in Śāṅkara's,” but she departs from Neevel in claiming that Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy represents a combination of Śāktism, Vaiṣṇavism, and Vedānta. Matchett, “The Teaching of Rāmākṛishna in Relation to the Hindu Tradition and as Interpreted by Vivekānanda,” *Religion* 11 (1981), 176. Dhīreśānanda argues that Śāradānanda's biography of Sri Ramakrishna, *Līlāprasaṅga*, champions a “Śāktādvaitic” interpretation of Sri Ramakrishna's life and teachings (“*Nānā Dṛṣṭite Śrīrāmākṛiṣṇa*,” 221–22). By contrast, both Neevel and Matchett claim that Śāradānanda's *Līlāprasaṅga* endorses an Advaitic interpretation of Sri Ramakrishna's life and teachings. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to adjudicate this scholarly controversy concerning how best to understand Śāradānanda's philosophical interpretation of Sri Ramakrishna.

5. Narasingha Sil, “Is Ramakrishna a Vedantin, a Tantrika or a Vaishnava? An Examination,” *Asian Studies Review* 21.2 (Nov. 1997), 212. Similarly, Amiya P. Sen claims that Sri Ramakrishna “borrowed ideas across Vedantic schools without being sensitive to the problems of their reconciliation.” “Universality and Sri Ramakrishna: An Historical and Philosophical Reappraisal,” *Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences* 6.1 (1999), 91.

6. Sil, “Is Ramakrishna a Vedantin, a Tantrika or a Vaishnava?” 212. Also see Narasingha Sil, “Kali's Child and Krishna's Lover: An Anatomy of Ramakrishna's *Caritas Divina*,” *Religion* 29.3 (Sept. 2009), 289–98. Sil's views on this issue are based largely on his earlier psycho-biographical studies of Sri Ramakrishna, especially his book *Rāmākṛiṣṇa Paramahansa: A Psychological Profile* (New York: E.J. Brill, 1991). In this chapter, I focus on Sri Ramakrishna's recorded philosophical teachings, which can—and should—be studied apart from dubious psychoanalytic speculations about Sri Ramakrishna.

drew upon ideas from a variety of philosophical sects and often warned against sectarian bigotry and fanaticism, so it is highly unlikely that he himself would have belonged exclusively to a particular sect.

In light of Sri Ramakrishna's catholic attitude and his unique syncretic method, a number of commentators—beginning with Sri Ramakrishna's direct disciples, Swami Vivekananda and Svāmī Turīyānanda, as well as Sri Aurobindo—have adopted a third approach to Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy that avoids the pitfalls of the other two interpretive approaches. At the end of the nineteenth century, Vivekananda suggested that the nonsectarian and harmonizing spirit of Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical teachings is best captured not by any particular philosophical school but by the original nonsectarian Vedānta of the Upaniṣads and the *Bhagavad Gītā*, which sought to harmonize a variety of apparently conflicting philosophical views.<sup>7</sup> In a remarkable Bengali letter written in 1919, Svāmī Turīyānanda pointed out deep affinities between Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy and the nonsectarian Vedānta of the *Gītā* and claimed that Sri Ramakrishna accepted the validity of all spiritual philosophies and religious doctrines.<sup>8</sup> In a similar vein, Sri Aurobindo declared in 1910 that the “teachings of Sri Ramakrishna and Vivekananda” provide the basis for a “more perfect synthesis” of the Upaniṣads than Śaṅkara's world-denying philosophy of Advaita Vedānta.<sup>9</sup>

Following their lead, a number of more recent commentators—including Satis Chandra Chatterjee, Swami Tapasyananda, and Jeffery D. Long—have interpreted Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy as a harmonizing, nonsectarian form of Vedānta, which they characterize variously as “Samanvayī Vedānta,”<sup>10</sup> “Samanvayī

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7. See, for instance, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda: Mayavati Memorial Edition*, vol. 3 (Mayavati: Advaita Ashrama, 2007), 233. For a detailed discussion of Swami Vivekananda's understanding of nonsectarian Vedānta vis-à-vis Sri Ramakrishna, see sections I and II of my article “*Asminnasya ca tadyogaṃ śāsti*: Swami Vivekananda's Interpretation of *Brahmasūtra* 1.1.19 as a Hermeneutic Basis for Samanvayī Vedānta,” in *The Life, Legacy, and Contemporary Relevance of Swami Vivekananda: New Reflections*, ed. Rita Sherma and James McHugh (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, forthcoming).

8. *Svāmī Turīyānanda Patra* (Kolkata: Udbodhan, 2005), 254–55. For an English translation of the letter, see *Spiritual Treasures: Letters of Swami Turīyananda*, trans. Swami Chetananda (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2000), 195–98.

9. Sri Aurobindo, *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, vol. 13: *Essays in Philosophy and Yoga, Shorter Works, 1910–1950* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1998), 10–11.

10. Satis Chandra Chatterjee, *Classical Indian Philosophies: Their Synthesis in the Philosophy of Sri Ramakrishna*, 2nd ed. (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, [1963] 1985), 104–52. Swami Mumukshananda also uses the term “Samanvayī Vedānta” in his article “Vedānta: Concepts and Application through Sri Ramakrishna's Life,” in *Vedānta: Concepts and Application* (Kolkata: Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 2000), 292–316.

Advaita,”<sup>11</sup> “Neo-Advaita,”<sup>12</sup> “Neo-Vedānta,”<sup>13</sup> and “Integral Vedānta.”<sup>14</sup> Joining forces with these scholars, I will make the case in this chapter that a nonsectarian Vedāntic framework best accounts for the catholicity, sophistication, and overall consistency and coherence of Sri Ramakrishna’s philosophical teachings.

In particular, I characterize Sri Ramakrishna’s philosophy as “Vijñāna Vedānta,” a nonsectarian philosophy—rooted in the mystical experience of what he calls *vijñāna*—that accommodates and harmonizes various apparently conflicting religious faiths, sectarian philosophies, and spiritual disciplines.<sup>15</sup> In the *Kathāmṛta*, Sri Ramakrishna repeatedly contrasts two types of spiritual experience: *jñāna* (“Knowledge”), the Advaitic realization of the impersonal Ātman, and *vijñāna* (“Intimate Knowledge”), a vaster, richer, and more intimate realization of God as the Infinite Reality that is both personal and impersonal, with and without form, immanent in the universe and beyond it. I contend that Sri Ramakrishna’s unique perspective of *vijñāna* holds the key to appreciating the unity and coherence of his philosophical teachings.

Crucially, Sri Ramakrishna’s philosophical views were based not on intellectual speculation but on his own spiritual experiences. Section I discusses briefly how his upbringing, eclectic religious practices, and numerous spiritual experiences all contributed to his mature philosophical outlook. Section II then addresses the important hermeneutic question of how to reconstruct accurately Sri Ramakrishna’s philosophical views on the basis of the *Kathāmṛta*, which contains dialogues in Bengali between Sri Ramakrishna and his visitors. I delineate five basic interpretive principles that will govern my reconstructions of Sri Ramakrishna’s philosophical positions throughout this book. With this hermeneutic groundwork in place, section III provides a detailed reconstruction of the six main tenets of Sri Ramakrishna’s nonsectarian philosophy of Vijñāna Vedānta. I hope to demonstrate that the concept of *vijñāna* provides the unifying framework for interpreting and synthesizing Sri Ramakrishna’s philosophical views on the scope of reason, the nature of God, the relationship between Brahman and

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11. Svāmī Śraddhānanda, *Bandi Tomāi: Rāmakṛṣṇa-Vivekānanda Bhābāñjali* (Kolkata: Udbodhan, 1994), 128–41.

12. Chatterjee, *Classical Indian Philosophies*, 149–52.

13. Swami Tapasyananda, *Bhakti Schools of Vedānta* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1990), 9–33, esp. 23–33; Jeffery D. Long, “Advaita and Dvaita: Bridging the Gap—the Ramakrishna Tradition’s both/and Approach to the Dvaita/Advaita Debate,” *Journal of Vaishnava Studies* 16.2 (Spring 2008), 49–70.

14. Swami Bhajananda, “Philosophy of Sri Ramakrishna,” *University of Calcutta Journal of the Department of Philosophy* 9 (2010), 1–56, esp. 27–28.

15. I coined the term “Vijñāna Vedānta” myself, but I later discovered that Sharma used a similar term, “*Vijnanadvaita*,” to describe Sri Ramakrishna’s philosophy. See Sharma, *Ramakrishna and Vivekananda*, 42.

Śakti, the ontological status of the universe, the different stages in spiritual experience, and the harmony of various religious and spiritual paths. I will also indicate briefly the scriptural basis of Sri Ramakrishna's Vijñāna Vedānta by tracing each of its six tenets to passages from the Upaniṣads and the *Gītā*. Finally, section IV argues that his philosophy of Vijñāna Vedānta helps bring to light some of the major weaknesses of Paul Hacker's "Neo-Vedāntic" paradigm for interpreting modern Vedāntins such as Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo.

## I. The Spiritual Basis of Sri Ramakrishna's Philosophical Outlook: His Upbringing, Religious Practices, and Mystical Experiences

Sri Ramakrishna's upbringing and environment, his various religious practices and spiritual experiences, and his spiritual and philosophical training under numerous gurus all played an important role in shaping his mature philosophical outlook.<sup>16</sup> Sri Ramakrishna was raised in a Vaiṣṇava household, which performed daily worship not only of the family Deity Raghuvīr (an epithet of Rāmacandra, an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu) but also of Śiva. In 1855, he became the priest of the Kālī Temple at Dakshineswar, a village near Kolkata. Rānī Rāsmaṇi, the unusually broad-minded founder of the Kālī Temple, was a Śākta whose "*iṣṭa-devatā*" ("Chosen Ideal") was Kālī, but she designed the Kālī Temple with the explicit intention of personifying the harmony of the Hindu sects of Śāktism, Vaiṣṇavism, and Śaivism. Accordingly, she installed next to the Kālī Temple a row of twelve temples dedicated to Śiva as well as another temple dedicated to Rādhākānta (an epithet for Kṛṣṇa). The liberal religious outlook of his parents and of Rānī Rāsmaṇi was a formative influence on Sri Ramakrishna, who would later teach the harmony of all religious and spiritual paths.

From 1855 to 1874, Sri Ramakrishna practiced numerous spiritual disciplines in a variety of traditions, including Tantra, Vaiṣṇavism, Advaita Vedānta, Islam, and Christianity.<sup>17</sup> He claimed to have attained God-realization for the first time in 1856, by worshipping, and praying intensely to, the Divine Mother in the form of Kālī.<sup>18</sup> Sri Ramakrishna then went on to practice, and to attain perfection in, numerous other *bhāvas* ("attitudes toward God"), including *dāsyabhāva*

16. For the biographical details in this section, I rely primarily on *LP*.

17. For a detailed account of Sri Ramakrishna's *sādhana* period, see *LPI* / *DP* 144–364.

18. To avoid cumbersome locutions, when I refer to the mystical experiences Sri Ramakrishna claimed to have had, I often leave out qualifying phrases such as "claimed to have" or "reportedly." However, it should be kept in mind throughout this book that these qualifying phrases are always implied. I am not dogmatically asserting the veridicality of Sri Ramakrishna's reported mystical experiences.

(“attitude of a servant”), *vātsalyabhāva* (“attitude of a parent”), *sakhībhāva* (“attitude of a friend”), and *mādhuryabhāva* (“attitude of a lover”). From 1861 to 1863, he was instructed in Tāntrika disciplines by his first guru, Bhairavī Brāhmaṇī, a female brahmin monk who was an adept in both Tāntrika and Vaiṣṇava practices. The learned Bhairavī Brāhmaṇī also had a deep knowledge of the scriptures as well as Vaiṣṇava and Tāntrika philosophy, so Sri Ramakrishna likely learned a great deal from her about the philosophical tenets of Vaiṣṇavism and Tantra.

In 1864, Sri Ramakrishna engaged in Advaitic discipline under the guidance of the itinerant Advaitin monk Totāpurī, and he quickly attained the highest knowledge of nondual Brahman in *nirvikalpa samādhi*, a state in which all consciousness of duality is transcended. As Sri Ramakrishna himself mentioned, Totāpurī was well versed in Advaitic philosophy and taught him the key philosophical doctrines of Advaita Vedānta.<sup>19</sup> In 1866, after Totāpurī’s departure, Sri Ramakrishna remained in *nirvikalpa samādhi* for six months until he finally received a command from the Divine Mother to remain in “*bhāvamukha*,” a threshold state of consciousness between the relative and the Absolute (*LP* I.ii.159–78 / *DP* 303–21). Accordingly, instead of leaving his body in *nirvikalpa samādhi*, he remained in the state of *bhāvamukha*, reveling in both the personal and impersonal aspects of God and thereby realizing the equal validity of the paths of *bhakti* (devotion) and *jñāna* (knowledge).<sup>20</sup> (As we will see in section III, Sri Ramakrishna, in his later teachings, would refer to this unique spiritual state of *bhāvamukha* as “*vijñāna*.”) In the same year as his Advaitic practice, he also practiced Islamic *sādhana* under the guidance of a Muslim guru named Govinda Rāy—who was likely a Sufi—and realized God after three days.<sup>21</sup> Toward the end of 1874, Sri Ramakrishna was instructed in the Bible and soon had an overwhelming vision of Jesus, who approached him and finally merged into him.<sup>22</sup>

19. See, for instance, *K* 279–80 and 991 / *G* 297 and 915.

20. See Swami Tapasyananda’s excellent discussions of Sri Ramakrishna’s state of *bhāvamukha* in *Bhakti Schools of Vedānta*, 359–64 and *Sri Ramakrishna: Life and Teachings (An Interpretative Study)* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 2008), 60–74.

21. During Sri Ramakrishna’s Islamic practice, passages from the Bengali translation of the *Qur’an* were read out to him. He also practiced the disciplines prescribed in the *Qur’an* and stopped worshipping Hindu deities during his Islamic practice. See *LP* I.ii.175–77 / *DP* 318–20. For an extensive account of Sri Ramakrishna’s Islamic *sādhana*, see Swami Prabhananda, *More about Ramakrishna* (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 1993), 80–109.

22. For an account of Sri Ramakrishna’s Christian *sādhana*, see *LP* I.ii.210–12 / *DP* 356–58. Sri Ramakrishna revered Jesus as an incarnation of God and he owned a copy of the Bible, which was read out to him on occasion—especially the teachings of Jesus contained in the synoptic gospels. In general, it can be said that the form of Christianity practiced by Sri Ramakrishna was based more on the spiritual and ethical teachings of Jesus than on theological dogmas. For more details about Sri Ramakrishna’s Christian practices, see Swami Prabhananda, *More about Ramakrishna*, 110–48.

Sri Ramakrishna himself later acknowledged the importance of his eclectic religious practices and his various spiritual experiences in shaping his broad spiritual and philosophical outlook. As he put it, “I had to practice each religion for a time—Hinduism, Islam, Christianity. Furthermore, I followed the paths of the Śāktas, Vaiṣṇavas, and [Advaita] Vedāntins. I realized that there is only one God toward whom all are travelling; but the paths are different” (*K*77 / *G* 129). Throughout this book, it is essential to bear in mind that Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical views were based not on intellectual reasoning but on his own religious practices and spiritual experiences.

## II. Five Interpretive Principles for Reconstructing Sri Ramakrishna's Philosophical Views from the *Kathāmṛta*

While scholars have interpreted Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy in a variety of ways, they have rarely articulated the hermeneutic assumptions *underlying* their respective interpretations. As a result, commentators have tended to take Sri Ramakrishna's teachings out of the context in which they occur in the *Kathāmṛta*, without reflecting on the numerous interpretive challenges involved in gleaning Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical views from conversations held in Bengali between himself and his numerous visitors and devotees. Before attempting to reconstruct Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy, it is essential to establish higher-order interpretive principles that will allow us both to determine accurately what he intended to convey through a particular teaching and to distinguish his own views from views to which he refers but to which he does not necessarily subscribe. Accordingly, I will now delineate five fundamental interpretive principles—IP1 through IP5—that will help us to determine Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical views on the basis of the *Kathāmṛta*. Throughout the book, I will rely on these interpretive principles in order to reconstruct Sri Ramakrishna's positions on a variety of philosophical topics.

*Interpretive Principle 1 (IP1):* Instead of appealing to external philosophical doctrines or frameworks, we should strive to understand Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical teachings on their own terms.

In accordance with the principle of interpretive charity, we should at least provisionally assume that Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical teachings are self-contained—that is, that they contain all the concepts necessary to understand them. Hence, in order to avoid eisegesis, we should—whenever possible—refrain from invoking philosophical doctrines or concepts to which Sri Ramakrishna



himself did not appeal. If a commentator *does* appeal to external doctrines or frameworks to explain Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical views, then the burden is on the commentator to justify the use of these external concepts and to prove that these external concepts actually capture Sri Ramakrishna's own intentions.

Admittedly, virtually all commentators on Sri Ramakrishna's teachings claim to interpret his teachings on their own terms, so it might seem as if IP1 need not be explicitly stated. Unfortunately, however, many commentators have routinely violated IP1 by lapsing into the eisegetic practice of reading their own assumptions and conceptual frameworks into Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical teachings. The eisegetic tendency of some Advaitic commentators has been especially egregious. Commentators such as Svāmī Oṃkārananda, Svāmī Prajñānānanda, and Dineś Bhaṭṭācārya repeatedly invoke Advaitic concepts and analogies—like the rope-snake analogy and the distinction between *vyāvahārika* and *pāramārthika* levels of reality—in order to explain Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical teachings, even though Sri Ramakrishna himself never employed these Advaitic concepts.<sup>23</sup>

It is worth noting that IP1 does not prohibit us from engaging in the comparative project of finding parallels between Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical views and any number of existing philosophies, both Eastern and Western. For instance, Debabrata Sen Sarma and Swami Tadananda have fruitfully compared Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical teachings with the philosophy of Kāśmīri Śaivism,<sup>24</sup> while Long has demonstrated affinities between Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy and both the Jaina *anekānta* doctrine and Alfred North Whitehead's process philosophy.<sup>25</sup> IP1 entails only that Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical teachings should be understood on their own terms *before* they are compared with other philosophies. In accordance with IP1, I strive throughout the book first to reconstruct Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical views on the basis of his own teachings and then to analyze them from a cross-cultural perspective.

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23. See, for instance, Oṃkārananda, "*Brahma o Śakti abhed*," 229–31; Prajñānānanda, *Vāñi o Vicār*, vol. 1, 159–69, vol. 3, 244–60, vol. 4, 225–48; and Bhaṭṭācārya, "*Darśan Cintāi Śaṅkara-Rāmānuja-Madhva-Śrīrāmakṛṣṇa*," 605.

24. Debabrata Sen Sarma, "The Spiritual Life of Ramakrishna and His Gospel in the Light of Kashmir Shaivism," in *Sri Ramakrishna: Myriad Facets* (Kolkata: Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 2011), 394–412; Swami Tadananda, "Kashmir Shaivism in the Light of Sri Ramakrishna's Teachings," in *Approaching Ramakrishna* (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2011), 195–206.

25. See, for instance, Long, "Advaita and Dvaita"; Jeffery D. Long, "(Tentatively) Putting the Pieces Together: Comparative Theology in the Tradition of Sri Ramakrishna," in *The New Comparative Theology*, ed. Francis Clooney (London: Continuum, 2010), 151–70; and Jeffery D. Long, "*Anekānta Vedānta: Toward a Deep Hindu Religious Pluralism*," in *Deep Religious Pluralism: Whitehead's Philosophy and Religious Diversity*, ed. David Ray Griffin (Louisville: John Knox Westminster Press, 2005), 130–57.

*Interpretive Principle 2 (IP2):* The context of Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical teachings often provides crucial insight into their meaning and status.

Many commentators have tended to strip Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical teachings of their context, ignoring the unique dialogic situation in which they were imparted. Three aspects of the context of his philosophical teachings are especially important. First, it is often helpful to know the viewpoint of the interlocutor to whom Sri Ramakrishna gives a particular teaching. In the next section, I will point to instances in the *Kathāmṛta* where a particular teaching becomes clearer when one understands the standpoint of the person with whom Sri Ramakrishna is speaking—whether, for instance, he is an Advaitin, a Vaiṣṇava Gosvāmī, or a follower of the Brāhmo Samāj.

Second, it is important to determine whether something the interlocutor said or asked prompted Sri Ramakrishna to give the teaching. For instance, in the entry from 21 September 1884, Sri Ramakrishna points out that after Pratāp Hājra once dismissed Śakti as a lower reality than Brahman, Sri Ramakrishna responded that “Brahman and Śakti are inseparable,” thus strongly suggesting that the primary thrust of this teaching is to assert the reality of Śakti (K 568 / G 550).

Third, the verbal cues Sri Ramakrishna uses to frame many of his teachings help us to determine whether the teaching represents his own view or the view of another person or sect which he may or may not accept. For instance, Sri Ramakrishna almost invariably prefaces his teachings on Advaita Vedānta by adding a verbal cue such as “Vedāntavādīs say . . .” or “Jñānīs say . . .,” thereby indicating that these teachings do not necessarily represent his own view. In fact, the verbal cues used in certain contexts sometimes indicate that he *contrasts* the Advaitic standpoint with his own standpoint. In the entry from 26 October 1884, Sri Ramakrishna states, “In the light of Vedāntic reasoning, the world is illusory, unreal as a dream. The Supreme Soul is the Witness—the witness of the three states of waking, dream, and deep sleep” (K 691 / G 651). Shortly thereafter, he asserts, “But for my part I accept everything: *Turiya* and also the three states of waking, dream, and deep sleep. I accept all three states. I accept all—Brahman and also *māyā*, the universe, and its living beings” (K 691 / G 652). Notice that the thrice-repeated verbal cue “I accept” clearly indicates that this teaching—and not the Advaitic view he previously stated—represents the view he actually holds.

Verbal cues such as this one—which appear frequently in the *Kathāmṛta*—are extremely important in helping us to determine Sri Ramakrishna's own philosophical views. If a verbal cue such as “But for my part . . .” (K 691 / G 652), “This is my final and most mature opinion” (*eṭi pākā mat*) (K 228 / G 257), “the teachings of this place” (*ekhānkār mat*) (K 568 / G 550), “Do you know my attitude?” (K 577 / G 559), or “I have come to the final realization that . . .” (*śeṣ ei bujhechi*) (K 594 / G 638) frames a particular teaching, then we can be certain that the teaching represents Sri Ramakrishna's own view.



*Interpretive Principle 3 (IP3)*: Any adequate interpretation of Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical teachings must take into account Sri Ramakrishna's avowed nonsectarianism, his catholic acceptance of all sectarian views and religious faiths as effective spiritual paths.

At various places in the *Kathāmṛta*, Sri Ramakrishna expresses his acceptance of all sects and spiritual paths. For instance, he declares:

I have practised all the disciplines; I accept all paths. I respect the Śāktas, the Vaiṣṇavas, and also the Vedāntins. Therefore people of all sects come here. And every one of them thinks that I belong to his school. I also respect the modern Brahmajñānīs. (*K* 552 / *G* 538)

Here, Sri Ramakrishna explicitly indicates his acceptance of “all paths,” including the Śāktas who worship Kālī, the Vaiṣṇavas who worship Kṛṣṇa, the “modern Brahmajñānīs”—by which he means the followers of the Brāhmo Samāj—who accept the personal but formless God, and the Advaita Vedāntins, who accept only the impersonal Brahman.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, Sri Ramakrishna cannily anticipates later attempts by various commentators to pigeonhole him into a particular sect: as he puts it, every follower of a sect who visits him “thinks that I belong to his school.” It is precisely because Sri Ramakrishna did not affiliate himself exclusively with any particular sect that he was able to accept *all* sects and make everyone feel as if he belonged to their sect alone.

Accordingly, IP3 rules out any attempt to pigeonhole Sri Ramakrishna into a particular exclusivistic sect—be it Advaita Vedānta, Viśiṣṭādvaita, Vaiṣṇavism, or Tantra—since any such sectarian interpretation would fail to account for Sri Ramakrishna's uncompromisingly nonsectarian attitude. As Sri Ramakrishna puts it, “A person who has harmonized everything is indeed a real man. Most people are one-sided. But I find that all opinions point to the One. All views—the Śākta, the Vaiṣṇava, the Vedānta—have that One for their center. He who is formless is also with form, and it is He who appears in different forms” (*K* 494 / *G* 490). Similarly, he declares on another occasion that “Śaṅkara's Advaitic explanation of Vedānta is true, and so is the Viśiṣṭādvaitic interpretation of Rāmānuja” (*K* 778 / *G* 733). It is clear from such statements that an essential aspect of Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical outlook is his conscious harmonization of various sectarian views on the basis of a maximally capacious understanding of God as both personal and impersonal, both with and without form. In light of this fact,

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26. It should be noted that when Sri Ramakrishna refers to “Vedāntins” in the *Kathāmṛta*, he means the followers of Advaita Vedānta, who take the universe to be unreal.

any interpretation of Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical teachings that fails to take into account his nonsectarian outlook is seriously deficient.

*Interpretive Principle 4 (IP4):* Sri Ramakrishna's nonsectarian attitude allows him to accept the spiritual core of various philosophical sects without subscribing to all the doctrines of any sect in particular.

One of the greatest challenges in determining Sri Ramakrishna's overall philosophical framework is his eclectic method of employing concepts and terms from a wide variety of philosophical sects, including Advaita, Viśiṣṭādvaita, Vaiṣṇavism, Tantra, and Śāktism. For instance, when explaining his teaching that the universe is a real manifestation of God, Sri Ramakrishna often explicitly appeals to Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaitic position that "Brahman, or the Absolute, is qualified by the universe and its living beings" (*K* 778 / *G* 733). Gupta, the author of the *Kathāmṛta*, infers from such statements that Sri Ramakrishna was a Viśiṣṭādvaitin: "Tḥākur [Sri Ramakrishna] does not say that this universe is unreal like a dream. He says, 'If we say so, then the weight of the bel-fruit will fall short.' His view is not the doctrine of *māyā* [of Advaita Vedānta] but the doctrine of Viśiṣṭādvaita" (*K* 698).<sup>27</sup> Noticing certain fundamental differences between Sri Ramakrishna's views and those of Śaṅkara, Gupta concludes that Sri Ramakrishna was a Viśiṣṭādvaitin.

By contrast, some commentators have claimed that Sri Ramakrishna was an Advaitin, partly on the basis of his teachings on *nirvikalpa samādhi*. For instance, Sri Ramakrishna states, "On attaining the Knowledge of Brahman in *nirvikalpa samādhi*, one realizes Brahman, the Infinite, without form or shape and beyond mind and words" (*K* 181 / *G* 218). According to Svāmī Oṃkārananda, since "Śakti does not exist" in the state of *nirvikalpa samādhi*, Sri Ramakrishna's acceptance of the state of *nirvikalpa samādhi* implies his acceptance of the Advaitic view that Śakti is unreal from the ultimate standpoint.<sup>28</sup> Meanwhile, Neevel emphasizes Sri Ramakrishna's teachings on the inseparability of Brahman and Śakti and the reality of the universe as a manifestation of God, on the basis of which he concludes that Sri Ramakrishna accepted a "basically tantric framework of concepts and values."<sup>29</sup>

However, all such sectarian interpretations of Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical views are based on the simplistic hermeneutic assumption that Sri Ramakrishna's approving reference to a doctrine or spiritual experience of a particular philosophical school makes him a card-carrying member of that school. If this assumption were true, Sri Ramakrishna would be guilty of flagrant contradiction, since

27. Nikhilananda omits this passage from his translation of the *Kathāmṛta*.

28. Oṃkārananda, "*Brahma o Śakti abhed*," 230.

29. Neevel, "The Transformation of Śrī Rāmakrishna," 78.

he refers approvingly to numerous *conflicting* sects. For instance, Advaita Vedānta accepts the reality of *nirguṇa* Brahman, while Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta does not. If Sri Ramakrishna's approving references to both these sects meant that he was at once an Advaitin and a Viśiṣṭādvaitin, he would be committed to the outright contradiction that *nirguṇa* Brahman both exists and does not exist.

In fact, Sri Ramakrishna's stance toward various philosophical sects is much more nuanced and dialectical than sectarian interpreters assume: he accepts what he takes to be the *spiritual core* of each philosophical sect without necessarily accepting all the specific doctrines of that sect.<sup>30</sup> Hence, while Sri Ramakrishna recognizes that different philosophical sects are often mutually exclusive at the level of doctrine, he strives to harmonize these sects at the level of spiritual experience.<sup>31</sup> From Sri Ramakrishna's nonsectarian perspective, each philosophical sect is based on a unique spiritual truth, so the core spiritual truths of all these schools are complementary rather than conflicting.

Following Tantra and Śāktism, Sri Ramakrishna affirms that the impersonal Brahman and the dynamic Śakti are complementary aspects of one and the same Divine Reality (*K* 861 / *G* 802).<sup>32</sup> However, in contrast to sectarian Tāntrikas who conceive the ultimate reality as Śiva, Sri Ramakrishna maintains that one and the same "Saccidānanda" ("Truth-Consciousness-Bliss")—the well-known Vedāntic epithet for the Supreme Reality—is called by various names such as

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30. For a rigorous and detailed defense of this argument, see the final two chapters of Chatterjee's *Classical Indian Philosophies* (77–152).

31. Sri Ramakrishna gained knowledge of a wide variety of Indian scriptures and traditional Indian philosophies through numerous oral sources, including the spiritual and philosophical instructions he received from his gurus, the philosophical discourses of learned pandits who visited him in Dakshineswar, and scriptural and philosophical texts that were read aloud to him. One of the few books Sri Ramakrishna himself owned and recommended to others—and which was read out to him on numerous occasions—was Bipin Bihārī Ghoṣāl's *Mukti o tāhār Sādhān* (*Liberation and Spiritual Practice*) (Kolkata: Udbodhan, [1881] 1987), an eclectic Bengali compilation of passages from various Indian philosophical texts. Ghoṣāl provides excerpts from a wide range of Indian scriptures and philosophical texts, including three Upaniṣads (Kāṭha, Praśna, and Muṇḍaka), the *Bhagavad Gītā*, two major texts from the Vaiṣṇava tradition (the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and Rūpa Gosvāmī's *Bhaktirasāmṛtasindhu*), four texts from the Tāntrika tradition (*Mahānirvāṇa Tantra*, *Kulārṇava Tantra*, *Jñānasāṅkalinī Tantra*, and *Śivasamhitā*), and many texts from the Advaitic tradition, including *Aṣṭāvakra Samhitā* (a copy of which Sri Ramakrishna owned), *Pañcadaśī*, *Yogavāsiṣṭha*, and *Ātmabodha*.

32. Sri Ramakrishna's knowledge of Tantra and Śāktism derived primarily from his own varied spiritual experiences, especially his realization of *vijñāna*, which revealed to him that Brahman and Śakti are inseparable and that the universe is a real manifestation of Śakti. However, he also learned Tāntrika principles from his Vaiṣṇava Tāntrika guru, the Bhairavī Brāhmaṇī, and from a book he owned, Ghoṣāl's *Mukti o tāhār Sādhān*, which includes numerous passages from Tāntrika texts.

“Śiva,” “Kālī,” and “Kṛṣṇa” (*K* 422 / *G* 423).<sup>33</sup> Following Advaita Vedānta, Sri Ramakrishna conceives the “eternal” (*nitya*) aspect of the Infinite Reality as the Advaitic *nirguṇa* Brahman, which is realized in the state of *nirvikalpa samādhi*.<sup>34</sup> However, he rejects the Advaitic doctrine that the universe, living beings, and the personal God are not ultimately real.<sup>35</sup> Following Viśiṣṭādvaita, he accepts the reality of God's “*līlā*,” God's sportive manifestation as the individual soul and the universe. However, while Rāmānuja conceives the Supreme Reality as only personal (*saguṇa*), Sri Ramakrishna teaches that the Supreme Reality is *both*

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33. Although the early Upaniṣads do not refer to the full term *saccidānanda*, they do frequently refer to Brahman separately as *sat*, *cit*, and *ānanda*. See, for instance, Taittirīya Upaniṣad II.i.1 and Chāndogya Upaniṣad VI.ii.1. The Tejobindu Upaniṣad III.1–III.12 contains one of the earliest references to *saccidānanda*.

34. Sri Ramakrishna's understanding of Advaita Vedānta comes closer to Gauḍapāda's Advaita and the post-Śāṅkaran Yoga-oriented Advaita tradition than to Śāṅkara's Advaita. While Śāṅkara grants empirical (*vyāvahārika*) reality to the universe, Gauḍapāda frequently claims that the universe is as unreal as a dream, as in *Māṇḍūkya Kārikā* II.31 and III.29. When explaining Advaitic doctrine, Sri Ramakrishna follows Gauḍapāda in likening the universe to a dream (*K* 691 / *G* 651–52), and he conspicuously refrains from invoking Śāṅkara's distinction between *vyāvahārika* and *pāramārthika* levels of reality. Moreover, Sri Ramakrishna repeatedly insists that *nirvikalpa samādhi* is necessary for—indeed, virtually equivalent to—*brahmajñāna* (see, for instance, *K* 83 / *G* 133). Sri Ramakrishna's close alignment of *brahmajñāna* with *nirvikalpa samādhi* is in line with prominent post-Śāṅkaran Advaitic texts such as *Pañcadaśī* and *Vedāntasāra*, both of which stress the importance of *nirvikalpa samādhi*. There were at least five sources for Sri Ramakrishna's distinctive understanding of Advaita. First, and most importantly, his teachings on Advaita derived from his own Advaitic practices and his repeated experience of *nirvikalpa samādhi*. Second, his Advaita guru Totāpurī taught Sri Ramakrishna an Advaitic doctrine—closer to Gauḍapāda's than to Śāṅkara's—that emphasizes the dream-like nature of the world, the need for constant meditation on the Ātman, and the importance of *nirvikalpa samādhi* for the attainment of *brahmajñāna* (see, for instance, *K* 279–80 / *G* 297 and *K* 991 / *G* 915). Third, Sri Ramakrishna owned a copy of the Advaitic book *Aṣṭāvakra Saṃhitā*, which strongly emphasizes the path of *vicāra* (“intellectual reasoning”) and the illusoriness of the world. Fourth, Sri Ramakrishna also might have been influenced by various Advaitic texts quoted in Ghosāl's *Mukti o tākār Sādhana*, such as *Pañcadaśī* (which stresses *nirvikalpa samādhi*) and the *Yogavāsishṭha* (which repeatedly likens the world to a dream). Fifth, Sri Ramakrishna's knowledge of Advaita was likely enriched by his conversations with the numerous Advaita pandits he encountered in Dakshineswar over the course of several decades.

35. Some scholars argue against a non-realist interpretation of Śāṅkara's Advaita Vedānta. See, for instance, Bradley Malkovsky, *The Role of Divine Grace in the Soteriology of Śaṅkarācārya* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 45–67. According to Malkovsky, “one can find passages in Śaṅkara's writings that may be used in support of either a realist or illusionistic interpretation of his ontology” (*The Role of Divine Grace*, 50). Unfortunately, I do not have the space here to refute Malkovsky's interpretation of Śāṅkara, but see note 53, where I argue that Śāṅkara's interpretation of *Brahmasūtra* 1.1.12 strongly indicates a non-realist understanding of *saguṇa* Brahman. Numerous scholars also support my position that Śāṅkara consistently held that the personal God and the universe are unreal from the absolute (*pāramārthika*) standpoint. See, for instance, Satischandra Chatterjee and Dhirendramohan Datta, *An Introduction to Indian Philosophy* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta Press, 1939), 365–412, and M. Hiriyanna, *Outlines of Indian Philosophy* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, [1932] 1993), 336–82.

personal (*saguṇa*) and impersonal (*nirguṇa*). Following Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism, Sri Ramakrishna teaches the equal validity of various attitudes toward God, including the attitudes of servant (*dāśya*), friend (*sakhya*), parent (*vātsalya*), and lover (*mādhurya*). However, Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas take the Supreme Reality to be the personal God Kṛṣṇa, and they maintain that the *nirguṇa* Brahman is only Kṛṣṇa's "peripheral brilliance" (*tanubhā*). Sri Ramakrishna, in contrast to Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas, maintains that the Supreme Reality is equally *nirguṇa* and *saguṇa* and refrains from subordinating the impersonal aspect of the Supreme Reality to the personal aspect, or vice versa.

A pattern has clearly emerged: while Sri Ramakrishna embraces the spiritual core of numerous sectarian philosophies, he does not accept all the doctrines of *any* of these sects. Therefore, instead of trying to pigeonhole Sri Ramakrishna's views into a particular sectarian framework, we should strive to honor his unique nonsectarian method of harmonizing the complementary spiritual truths embodied in various sects.

*Interpretive Principle 5 (IP5):* Sri Ramakrishna's various philosophical teachings should be synthesized on the basis of a foundational concept or framework taught and accepted by Sri Ramakrishna himself.

Many commentators have attempted to establish the consistency of Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical views by invoking an external philosophical framework, be it Tāntrika, Advaitic, Viśiṣṭādvaitic, or Vaiṣṇava.<sup>36</sup> However, this eisegetic interpretive method clearly violates IP1, which prohibits any unjustified appeal to an external framework in order to explain Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical teachings. A more promising and noneisegetic means of establishing the consistency and coherence of Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical views is to find a foundational concept or framework *internal* to his teachings that lends philosophical coherence to all of his apparently disparate teachings. In accordance with IP5, I will argue in the next section that Sri Ramakrishna's teachings on *vijñāna* provide precisely such an immanent framework for establishing the coherence and interconnectedness of his various philosophical teachings. In the course of this book, I will show that Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical framework of *vijñāna* holds the key to understanding his views on God, religious diversity, mystical experience, and the problem of evil.

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36. See references in notes 2–4.

### III. The Central Tenets of Sri Ramakrishna's Vijñāna Vedānta

Sri Ramakrishna's realization of God through various religious paths and his unique spiritual state of *bhāvamukha* formed the experiential basis for his later teachings, which we find in the *Kathāmṛta*. Although he almost never refers to “*bhāvamukha*” in the *Kathāmṛta*, he refers repeatedly to the spiritual state of “*vijñāna*,” which—as we will see shortly—is a synonym for *bhāvamukha*. Tellingly, Sri Ramakrishna indicates that his notion of *vijñāna* can be found in scriptures such as the Upaniṣads, the *Gītā*, the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, and the *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa*.<sup>37</sup> Pursuing Sri Ramakrishna's hint, I will argue that his *vijñāna*-based philosophy is best understood in terms of the nonsectarian Vedānta of the Upaniṣads and the *Gītā*. Accordingly, in the course of this section, I will not only outline the six fundamental tenets of Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy of Vijñāna Vedānta but also indicate briefly their scriptural basis in the Upaniṣads and the *Gītā*.

*Vijñāna Vedānta 1* (VV1): After attaining *brahmajñāna* in *nirvikalpa samādhi*, ordinary people leave their body within twenty-one days, but certain divinely commissioned people known as *īśvarakoṭis* are able to return from the state of *nirvikalpa samādhi* and attain *vijñāna*—a spiritual state even greater than *brahmajñāna*—in which perfect *jñāna* and perfect *bhakti* are combined.

At numerous points in the *Kathāmṛta*, Sri Ramakrishna distinguishes two categories of people: while “*jīvakotiṣ*” are “ordinary people” (*sādhāraṇa lok*), “*īśvarakoṭis*” belong to a spiritual elite consisting only in “Incarnations of God and those born as a part of one of these Incarnations” (*avatār vā avatārer aṁśa*) (*K* 800 / *G* 749). According to Sri Ramakrishna, *īśvarakoṭis* are capable of a much greater spiritual attainment than *jīvakotiṣ*:

When the *kuṇḍalinī* rises to the *sahasrāra* and the mind goes into *samādhi*, the aspirant loses all consciousness of the outer world. He can no longer retain his body. If milk is poured into his mouth, it runs out again. In that state, death occurs within twenty-one days. . . . But the *īśvarakoṭis*, such as the Incarnations of God, can come down from this state of *samādhi*. They can descend from this exalted state because they like to live in the company of devotees and enjoy the love of God. God retains in them the “ego

37. At *K* 985 / *G* 910, Sri Ramakrishna remarks that the spiritual standpoint of *vijñāna* is taught in the *Gītā*, the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, and “Vedānta” (by which he presumably means the Upaniṣads). At *K* 390 / *G* 393 and in many other places in the *Kathāmṛta*, he points out that the idea of *vijñāna* is also found in the *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa*.



of Knowledge” [*vidyār āmī*] or the “ego of Devotion” [*bhakter āmī*] so that they may teach people. Their minds move between the sixth and the seventh planes. They run a boat-race back and forth, as it were, between these two planes. (*K* 505 / *G* 500)

While ordinary *jīvas* leave their body within twenty-one days of attaining *brahmajñāna* in *nirvikalpa samādhi*, *īśvarakoṭis* are able to “come down” from the state of *samādhi* in order to help others, shuttling back and forth between the empirical and absolute planes of consciousness.<sup>38</sup> Sri Ramakrishna’s teachings on the unique spiritual state of the *īśvarakoṭis* are clearly based on his own experience of remaining in *nirvikalpa samādhi* for six months and then returning to the empirical plane after receiving the divine command to “remain in *bhāvamukha*.” In the *Kathāmṛta*, Sri Ramakrishna refers to the *īśvarakoṭi*’s state of *bhāvamukha* as “*vijñāna*,” a stage “beyond even *brahmajñāna*” (*K* 266 / *G* 287).<sup>39</sup>

Sri Ramakrishna frequently explains the difference between *jñāna* and *vijñāna* by means of the metaphor of the staircase and the roof:

The *jñānī* gives up his identification with worldly things, discriminating, “Not this, not this.” Only then can he realize Brahman. It is like reaching the roof of a house by leaving the steps behind, one by one. But the *vijñānī*, who is more intimately acquainted with Brahman, realizes something more [*kintu vijñānī jini viśeṣrūpe tāhār saṅge ālāp karen tini āro kichu darśan karen*]. He realizes that the steps are made of the same materials as the roof: bricks, lime, and brick-dust. That which is realized as Brahman through the eliminating process of “Not this, not this” is then found to have become the universe and all its living beings. The *vijñānī* sees that the Reality which is *nirguṇa* is also *saguṇa*. A man cannot live on the roof for a long time. He comes down again. Those who realize Brahman in *samādhi*

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38. Sri Ramakrishna’s claim that ordinary souls leave their body in *samādhi* within twenty-one days seems to be based on his own six-month immersion in *nirvikalpa samādhi*, during which time his body was kept alive by a *sādhū* who occasionally forced milk down his throat. He also indicates, however, that he learned a similar teaching from a *brahmacārīn* (celibate spiritual aspirant): “A *brahmacārīn* once said to me, ‘One who goes beyond Kedar cannot keep his body alive.’ Likewise, a man cannot preserve his body after attaining *brahmajñāna*. The body drops off in twenty-one days” (*K* 346 / *G* 354). Sri Ramakrishna’s conception of the *īśvarakoṭi* is not so easy to trace historically. As far as I am aware, the term *īśvarakoṭi* is not found in any of the major Indian scriptures or philosophical schools. Śāradānanda suggests that Sri Ramakrishna’s concept of the *īśvarakoṭi* resembles the Sāṃkhyan concept of the *prakṛtilīna puruṣa* and the Vedāntic concept of the *adbhikārika*. See *LP* II.i.71–73 / *DP* 617–19.

39. See Tapasyananda’s helpful discussion of the connection between *vijñāna* and *bhāvamukha* in *Bhakti Schools of Vedānta*, 359–64.

come down also and find that it is Brahman that has become the universe and its living beings. . . . This is known as *vijñāna*. (K 50–51 / G 103–4)

Sri Ramakrishna describes the *jñānī* in Advaitic terms as one who attains *brahmajñāna* by reasoning that Brahman alone is real and the universe is unreal. The *vijñānī*, however, goes beyond even *brahmajñāna* by attaining the more expansive realization that Brahman “has become the universe and its living beings.”<sup>40</sup> As Sri Ramakrishna puts it elsewhere, while the *jñānī* dismisses the universe as a “framework of illusion” (*dhokār tātī*), the *vijñānī* embraces the universe as a “mansion of mirth” (*majār kuṭi*) (K 479 / G 478). The Advaitic *jñānī* realizes that *nirguṇa* Brahman alone is real, while the *vijñānī* attains the greater realization that the “Reality which is *nirguṇa* is also *saguṇa*.”

That Sri Ramakrishna considers the *vijñānī* to be superior to the *jñānī* is clear from the fact that he repeatedly contrasts the spiritual selfishness of *jñānīs* with the spiritual compassion of *vijñānīs*. Sri Ramakrishna likens *jñānīs*, who seek only their own salvation, to “a hollow piece of drift-wood” that “sinks if even a bird sits on it” (K 482 / G 479). By contrast, *vijñānīs* like Nārada, who strive to help others achieve spiritual enlightenment, “are like a huge log that not only can float across to the other shore but can carry many animals and other creatures as well” (K 482 / G 479).<sup>41</sup> Tellingly, Sri Ramakrishna explicitly declares himself to be a *vijñānī*: “I do not have the nature of a *jñānī*. . . . The Divine Mother has kept me in the state of a *bhakta*, a *vijñānī*” (K 391 / G 393).

Sri Ramakrishna explains that the “superior devotee” (*uttam bhakta*)—another name for the *vijñānī*—“sees that God alone has become everything,” and he then immediately adds, “Read the *Gītā*, the *Bhāgavata*, and the Vedānta, and you will

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40. In conversation, Swami Krishnasakhananda pointed out to me that Sri Ramakrishna describes the *vijñānī* as “coming down” from the state of *nirvikalpa samādhi*, which seems to imply that *vijñāna* is a lower state than *brahmajñāna*. Throughout this chapter, I have been careful not to claim that *vijñāna* is a “higher” state than *brahmajñāna*, since Sri Ramakrishna never made such a claim. However, Sri Ramakrishna *did* explicitly claim that *vijñāna* is “beyond even” *brahmajñāna* (K 266 / G 287), and he repeatedly affirmed that *vijñāna* is a much rarer, more intimate, and more comprehensive realization of the Divine Reality than *brahmajñāna*. Perhaps, then, we can say that Sri Ramakrishna took Advaitic *brahmajñāna* to be the *highest* spiritual experience but took *vijñāna* to be a *greater*—that is, fuller and more intimate—state than *brahmajñāna*. This seems to be Sharma's view: “[T]hough Ramakrishna is one with *Advaita Vedānta* in accepting the realization of *nirguṇa Brahman* as the summit of religious experience, he does not regard it as the final religious experience. For him the religious experience of coming back to the world to realize the identity of *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa Brahman* is a desirable next step” (*Ramakrishna and Vivekananda*, 40).

41. I agree with Sharma that “Ramakrishna thinks more highly of the *vijnani* than the *jnani*” (*Ramakrishna and Vivekananda*, 40).



understand all this” (*K* 985 / *G* 910).<sup>42</sup> Here, Sri Ramakrishna himself hints that his teachings on *viññāna* can be found in the Vedāntic scriptures. Indeed, Sri Aurobindo has made a convincing case that the *Gītā* employs the term *viññāna* in a manner that comes remarkably close to Sri Ramakrishna’s use of the term.<sup>43</sup> For instance, in his discussion of *Gītā* 7.2—which begins, “I will speak to you of *jñāna* and *viññāna*”—Sri Aurobindo interprets *jñāna* as the “essential” knowledge of the impersonal Ātman, “the one immutable Self and silent Spirit,”<sup>44</sup> while he interprets *viññāna* as the “comprehensive” or “integral” realization that “the Divine Being is all.”<sup>45</sup>

In the remainder of this section, I will attempt to demonstrate that Sri Ramakrishna’s concept of *viññāna*, when understood in all its ramifications, provides the master framework within which all of his major philosophical teachings should be understood. In particular, I will argue that the five remaining tenets of Sri Ramakrishna’s spiritual philosophy—VV2 through VV6—all derive from the unique standpoint of *viññāna* embodied in VV1.

*Viññāna Vedānta* 2 (VV2): Since the rational intellect is inherently limited, spiritual experience is the only reliable basis for arriving at supersensuous spiritual truths. On the suprarational basis of *viññāna*, we can affirm truths about God that appear to be contradictory or illogical to the rational intellect.

Sri Ramakrishna repeatedly teaches that the rational intellect can never grasp the supersensuous truths of the spiritual domain. He has two favorite analogies to illustrate this teaching. At several places in the *Kathāmṛta*, he highlights our inability to “comprehend the nature of God” (*K* 341 / *G* 351) or to “understand God’s ways” by means of the rhetorical question, “Can a one-seer pot hold ten seers of milk?” (*K* 229 / *G* 257). By likening the finite mind to a “one-seer pot,” Sri Ramakrishna points to the fundamental limitations of the rational intellect and its inherent incapacity to grasp spiritual realities.

Similarly, Sri Ramakrishna often teaches: “You have come to the orchard to eat mangoes; what need is there of knowing how many thousands of branches and millions of leaves there are in the orchard?” (*K* 907 / *G* 841). It is significant that

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42. Sri Ramakrishna uses the terms *īśvarakoti*, *viññānī*, and *uttam bhakta* interchangeably throughout the *Kathāmṛta*. That these three terms are synonymous is clear from the fact that he employs the same staircase-roof analogy to explain the spiritual state of all three.

43. See Ayon Maharaj, “Toward a New Hermeneutics of the *Bhagavad Gītā*: Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Aurobindo, and the Secret of *Viññāna*,” *Philosophy East and West* 65.4 (October 2015), 1209–33.

44. Sri Aurobindo, *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, vol. 19: *Essays on the Gita* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1997), 264.

45. Sri Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita*, 266.

this teaching was almost invariably given as a rebuke to visitors who asked particular questions about supersensuous matters, such as “Sir, is a man born again?” (*K* 907 / *G* 841), “Sir, what do you think of Theosophy and Spiritualism? Are these true?” (*K* 879 / *G* 819), and “Sir, if God alone does everything, how is it that a person is punished for his sins?” (*K* 976 / *G* 901). In the entry from 3 July 1884, Sri Ramakrishna clarifies that his mango-orchard analogy is meant to encourage us to strive to realize God through spiritual practice instead of engaging in “futile reasoning” about rationally insoluble metaphysical questions (*K* 501 / *G* 496).

In fact, Sri Ramakrishna explicitly approves of two spiritually beneficial forms of reasoning. First, he strongly encourages people to practice what he calls *sadasadvicāra*, reasoning “about the true and the false, about what is permanent and what is transitory” (*K* 501 / *G* 496). Second, in a fascinating exchange with Narendra (who would go on to become Swami Vivekananda), Sri Ramakrishna enthusiastically embraces a form of philosophical reasoning that acknowledges its own constitutive limitations:

Narendra said to M. [Gupta] that he had been reading a book by Hamilton, who wrote: “A learned ignorance is the end of philosophy and the beginning of religion.”

MASTER [SRI RAMAKRISHNA] (TO M.): “What does that mean?”

Narendra explained the sentence in Bengali. The Master beamed with joy and said in English, “Thank you! Thank you!” (*K* 255 / *G* 278)

Narendra, a student of Western philosophy at Scottish Church College, paraphrases the Scottish philosopher William Hamilton’s statement in *Lectures on Metaphysics and Logic* (1859), “A learned ignorance is thus the end of philosophy, as it is the beginning of theology.”<sup>46</sup> According to Hamilton, philosophical reasoning should terminate in epistemic humility, an acknowledgment of the inherent limitations of reason. Interestingly, several sentences before making this statement, Hamilton remarks that philosophy has two main tasks: first, to admit “the weakness of our discursive intellect,” and second, to demonstrate “that the limits of thought are not to be assumed as the limits of possibility.”<sup>47</sup>

Sri Ramakrishna’s enthusiastic approval of Hamilton’s statement about “learned ignorance” and his own frequent teachings on the limitations of the rational intellect suggest that he shares Hamilton’s metaphilosophical pessimism

46. William Hamilton, *Lectures on Metaphysics and Logic*, vol. 1 (Boston: Gould & Lincoln, 1859), 25.

47. Hamilton, *Lectures on Metaphysics and Logic*, 25.

about reason. Indeed, it is precisely the point of Sri Ramakrishna's "one-seer pot" analogy to illustrate what Hamilton calls the "weakness of our discursive intellect." Moreover, in an entry from 22 October 1885, Sri Ramakrishna gently chides Dr. Sarkār for assuming—contrary to Hamilton—that the limits of thought *are* the limits of possibility: "It is not mentioned in his [Dr. Sarkār's] 'science' that God can take human form; so how can he believe it?" (*K* 934 / *G* 864). In a Hamiltonian vein, Sri Ramakrishna points out that our inability to understand how God can incarnate as a human being, far from casting doubt on the possibility of *avatāra*-hood, only attests to the limitations of thought itself.

As his explicit approval of Hamilton's statement indicates, Sri Ramakrishna believes that intellectual reasoning can be spiritually beneficial if it humbly acknowledges its own limitations and thereby opens itself to faith in spiritual realities that lie beyond the reach of the intellect:

It is very difficult to understand that God can be a finite human being and at the same time the all-pervading Soul of the universe. The *līlā* belongs to the same Reality to which the *nitya* belongs [*jārī nitya, tāhārī līlā*]. How can we say emphatically with our small intelligence that God cannot assume a human form? Can we ever understand all these ideas with our little intellect? Can a one-seer pot hold four seers of milk? Therefore one should trust in the words of holy men and great souls, those who have realized God. (*K* 934 / *G* 864)

According to Sri Ramakrishna, since we cannot rationally comprehend how God can be both *nirguṇa* and *saṅguṇa* or how the *nitya* and the *līlā* can be complementary aspects of the same Reality, we should have faith in the testimony of "great souls" who have directly confirmed these spiritual truths through suprarational realization. In other words, Sri Ramakrishna's Hamiltonian pessimism about reason goes hand in hand with VV1: Sri Ramakrishna—unlike Hamilton—bases his positive assertions about the nature of God and spiritual experience on his own experience of *viṣṇāna*. In light of Sri Ramakrishna's principled pessimism about reason, it would be beside the point to object that Sri Ramakrishna's teachings about God and spiritual experience are illogical or contradictory. For Sri Ramakrishna, spiritual truths that might *seem* contradictory or illogical to the rational intellect are validated on the experiential basis of *viṣṇāna*. As we will see in chapter 2, this aspect of Sri Ramakrishna's thought bears striking affinities with the views of the contemporary theologian Benedikt Paul Göcke, who claims that God can possess various attributes and aspects that appear contradictory to the finite human mind.

Sri Ramakrishna's insistence on the inability of the intellect to grasp spiritual truths finds scriptural support in many of the Upaniṣads. For instance, Taittirīya Upaniṣad 2.9.1 declares that Brahman is "that from which speech, along with

mind, turn back, having failed to reach it.”<sup>48</sup> Just as Sri Ramakrishna teaches that supersensuous truths can be understood only through direct spiritual experience and not through intellectual reasoning, Kaṭha Upaniṣad 1.2.23 declares: “This Ātman cannot be known through much study, nor through the intellect, nor through much hearing. It can be known through the Ātman alone to which the aspirant prays; the Ātman of that seeker reveals Its true nature.”<sup>49</sup> Moreover, the Upaniṣads, when characterizing the nature of Brahman, often revel in the language of paradox. The fifth *mantra* of the Īśā Upaniṣad, for instance, makes a number of paradoxical assertions about the Ātman which defy rational explanation: “That moves, That does not move; That is far off, That is very near; That is inside all this, and That is also outside all this.”<sup>50</sup>

All the remaining tenets of Vijñāna Vedānta—namely, VV3 through VV6—should be understood from the spiritual standpoint of *vijñāna* and not from the limited standpoint of the rational intellect.

*Vijñāna Vedānta* 3 (VV3): The Infinite Divine Reality is both personal and impersonal, both with and without form, both immanent in the universe and beyond it, and much more besides.

At the foundation of Sri Ramakrishna's spiritual philosophy is a startlingly expansive conception of God as the “Infinite Reality” (*ananta*) whose inexhaustible plenitude is beyond our comprehension (*K* 181 / *G* 218). Since God is infinite and illimitable, we should never limit God to what our finite intellects can grasp of Him. Sri Ramakrishna elaborates the infinitude of God as follows: “That Reality which is the *nitya* is also the *līlā*. . . [E]verything is possible for God. He is formless, and again He assumes forms. He is the individual and He is the universe. He is Brahman, and He is Śakti. There is no limit to God. Nothing is impossible for Him” (*jāhāri nitya tāhāri līlā*. . . *tāhāte sab sambhabe. sei tini nirākār sākār. tini svarāt virāt. tini brahma, tini śakti*) (*K* 997 / *G* 920). To the rational intellect, such contradictory attributes as personality and impersonality, form and formlessness cannot possibly belong to God at the same time. However, it is crucial to bear in mind that VV3 follows from VV2: since God's infinite nature cannot be confined within the narrow walls of our rational understanding, we should humbly accept that “everything is possible for God.”

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48. Śaṅkarācārya, *Eight Upaniṣads with the Commentary of Śaṅkarācārya*, vol. 1, trans. Swami Gambhirananda (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 1989), 387.

49. Śaṅkarācārya, *Eight Upaniṣads*, vol. 1, 157.

50. Śaṅkarācārya, *Eight Upaniṣads*, vol. 1, 12.

Sri Ramakrishna explicitly teaches the infinitude and illimitability of God from the standpoint of *vijñāna*: “The *vijñānī* sees that the Reality which is *nirguṇa* is also *saguṇa*. . . . The *vijñānī* sees that the Reality which is Brahman is also Bhagavān; That which is beyond the three *guṇas* is also Bhagavān endowed with the six divine attributes” (*Vijñānī dekhe, jini nirguṇ, tinī saguṇ. . . . Vijñānī dekhe, jini brahma tinī bhagavān; jini guṇātīt, tinī śaḍaiśvaryapūrṇa bhagavān*) (*K* 51 / *G* 104). While the ordinary *jīva* is usually only capable of realizing God in a single limited aspect, the *vijñānī* realizes God in multiple aspects or forms, so a *vijñānī* alone—like Sri Ramakrishna himself—can authoritatively declare, on the basis of direct spiritual experience, that God is both personal and impersonal,<sup>51</sup> both with and without form, both immanent and transcendent.

Hence, it is from the standpoint of *vijñāna* that we have to understand Sri Ramakrishna’s numerous teachings on the infinite and illimitable nature of God. Interestingly, one of the most frequent ways he conveys God’s infinitude is to employ relative-correlative grammatical clauses—which the Bengali language inherited from Sanskrit—such as “*jini saguṇ, tinī nirguṇ*” (“That which is *saguṇa* is also *nirguṇa*”) (*K* 246 / *G* 271), “*jini brahma, tinī bhagavān*” (“That which is Brahman is also Bhagavān”) (*K* 51 / *G* 104), “*jini brahma, tinī śakti*” (“That which is Brahman is also Śakti”) (*K* 379 / *G* 382), “*jini nirākār, tinī sākār*” (“That which is without form is also with form”) (*K* 364 / *G* 370), “*jārī rūp, tinī arūp*” (“That which has form is also without form”) (*K* 246 / *G* 271), and “*jārī nitya, tāhārī līlā*” (“The *līlā* belongs to That to which the *nitya* belongs”) (*K* 380 / *G* 382). I believe there are two main reasons why Sri Ramakrishna so frequently employs this relative-correlative grammatical structure. First, the relative-correlative grammatical structure helps convey the infinitude of God by ascribing certain attributes to the grammatical subject without explicitly naming or rigidly defining it. For instance, the grammar of the statement “*jini saguṇ, tinī nirguṇ*” implies a grammatical subject to which the attributes of *saguṇatva* and *nirguṇatva* apply but

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51. To avoid any misunderstanding, I define here how I use the terms “personal” and “impersonal” throughout this book. The personal God (*saguṇa* Brahman) is the omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly loving God of theism who creates and governs the universe, who is responsive to our prayers, and with whom we are capable of having a loving relationship. As Sri Ramakrishna puts it, “It is enough to feel that God [*īśvara*] is a Person [*vyakti*] who listens to our prayers, who creates, preserves, and destroys the universe, and who is endowed with infinite power” (*K* 100 / *G* 149). The impersonal Reality (*nirguṇa* Brahman) is the nondual Brahman *without* any attributes—including even the omni-attributes of the theistic God. It should be obvious that “impersonal” does not imply “subpersonal.” The impersonal Brahman, far from being insentient like a stone, is the Supreme Reality *beyond* even divine personality. We cannot enter into a loving relationship with the impersonal nondual Brahman, since any such relationship would imply subject-object duality; rather, we can only realize our *identity* with the impersonal Brahman.

which is not *exhausted* by these attributes, thereby indicating that God is both *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa* and yet remains beyond both *saguṇatva* and *nirguṇatva*. Accordingly, at various points in the *Kathāmṛta*, Sri Ramakrishna declares that “God is with form, without form, and much more besides” (*tini sākār, nirākār, ābār kato ki*) (K 602 / G 577).

Second, the open-endedness of the relative-correlative construction allows Sri Ramakrishna to ascribe various attributes to God without committing himself to any narrow or sectarian doctrine about the nature of God. As VV2 indicates, while we can never rationally comprehend *how* God can be, say, both personal and impersonal or both with and without form, the *vijñānī* attains a direct suprarational *experience* of the truth of these various aspects or attributes of God. By employing relative-correlative clauses to describe God, Sri Ramakrishna is able to affirm the reality of numerous aspects and attributes of God without attempting the impossible task of providing a rational explanation of how God can have these seemingly contradictory aspects and attributes.

Sri Ramakrishna frequently conveys the infinitude of God by comparing God to an infinite ocean that freezes into ice at certain places:

The *bhaktas*—the *vijñānīs*—accept both the impersonal and the personal God [*nirākār-sākār*], both God without form and God with form [*arūp-rūp*]. In a shoreless ocean—an infinite expanse of water—visible blocks of ice are formed here and there by intense cold. Similarly, under the cooling influence of *bhakti*, as it were, the Infinite appears before the worshipper as God with form. Again, with the rising of the sun of knowledge [*jñān-sūrya*], those blocks of ice melt and only the infinite ocean remains. (K 861 / G 802)

Superficially, this analogy might seem to support the Advaitic view that *saguṇa* Brahman is ontologically inferior to *nirguṇa* Brahman. Oṃkārananda, for instance, argues that since the ice “melts” with the rising of the “sun of knowledge,” Sri Ramakrishna’s analogy indicates that *saguṇa* Brahman has only “relative or *vyāvahārika* reality.”<sup>52</sup> However, Oṃkārananda overlooks the fact that Sri Ramakrishna explicitly frames this analogy not from the Advaitic standpoint of the *jñānī* but from the vaster standpoint of the *vijñānī*, who realizes that God is *both* personal and impersonal, *both* with and without form. By means of this analogy of the infinite ocean, Sri Ramakrishna teaches that the personal God of the *bhaktas* and the impersonal Brahman of the *jñānīs* are equally real, since they

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52. Oṃkārananda, “*Nitya o Līlā*,” 293.

are complementary aspects of one and the same impersonal-personal Infinite Reality.<sup>53</sup>

In his explanation of this analogy of the ocean on 27 December 1883, Sri Ramakrishna makes absolutely clear that *saguṇa* Brahman and *nirguṇa* Brahman are on an ontological par: “One who follows the path of knowledge [*jñāna*]<sup>54</sup>—the path of discrimination—does not see the form of God anymore. To him, everything is formless. With the rising of the sun of knowledge, the ice form melts into the formless ocean. But mark this, form and formlessness belong to one and the same Reality [*jārī nirākār, tārī sākār*]” (*K* 364 / *G* 370). For Sri Ramakrishna, the infinite ocean corresponds to the *nirguṇa* aspect of the Infinite Reality realized by *jñānīs* in the state of *nirvikalpa samādhi*, while the ice formations correspond to the *saguṇa* and *sākāra* aspects of the same Infinite Reality, realized by *bhaktas*. Oṃkārananda clearly lapses into eisegesis by reading the Advaitic *vyāvahārika-pāramārthika* framework into Sri Ramakrishna’s analogy, since the very point of Sri Ramakrishna’s analogy is to teach, on the contrary, that *saguṇa* Brahman and *nirguṇa* Brahman are equally real.

Sri Ramakrishna also indicates the ontological parity of the personal God of *bhaktas* and the impersonal Absolute of *jñānīs* by means of his favorite teaching, “Brahman and Śakti are inseparable” (*brahma o śakti abhed*). At numerous places in the *Kathāmṛta*, Sri Ramakrishna explicitly identifies the doctrine that “Brahman and Śakti are inseparable” as his own view—“the teaching of this

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53. In *Ramakrishna and Vivekananda* (38–45), Sharma notes this key difference between Sri Ramakrishna’s philosophy and Advaita Vedānta. Ankur Barua has suggested to me in conversation that I might be misrepresenting Advaita by ascribing to it the position that *saguṇa* Brahman is ontologically inferior to *nirguṇa* Brahman. As Barua puts it, “an Advaitin could respond to Ramakrishna that what Ramakrishna seeks to indicate through *vijñāna* is already encapsulated in the pointer of the transpersonal Brahman of Advaita—the Brahman which cannot be conceptualised or named or encompassed somehow incorporates in its metaphysical plenitude the personalist dimensions of the divine.” While I have no objection to Barua’s preference for the term “transpersonal Brahman” to “impersonal Brahman,” I believe Barua overlooks a key ontological difference between the positions of Advaita Vedānta and Sri Ramakrishna. For the Advaitin, the transpersonal nondual Brahman alone is ontologically real, while the personal God of theism is *empirically* real but *ontologically* unreal. Śāṅkara, for instance, clearly adopts this position in his commentary on *Brahmasūtra* 1.1.12, where he distinguishes the “*upāśya*” Brahman, the personal God who is worshipped and contemplated, from the “*jñeya*” Brahman, the impersonal nondual Reality which can only be known. See Śāṅkarācārya, *Brahmasūtram: Śāṅkarabhāṣyopetaṃ* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2007), 35; Śāṅkarācārya, *Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya of Śrī Śāṅkarācārya*, trans. Swami Gambhirananda (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2006), 64. Crucially, Śāṅkara claims that the *upāśya* Brahman is associated with unreal “*upādhis*” (limiting adjuncts), while the *jñeya* Brahman is entirely devoid of *upādhis*. Accordingly, the Advaitin takes the personal God of theism to be ontologically unreal. By contrast, Sri Ramakrishna takes the personal God and the impersonal nondual Reality to be *equally real* aspects of one and the same Infinite Reality.



place”—and contrasts it with the Advaitic position that Śakti is unreal. For instance, Sri Ramakrishna remarks:

Once, while listening to the various incidents of the life of Caitanya, Hājṛā said that these were manifestations of Śakti, and that Brahman, the All-pervasive Spirit [*Vibhū*], had nothing to do with them. But can there be Śakti without Brahman? Hājṛā wants to nullify the teaching of this place [*ekhāṅkār mat*]. I have realized that Brahman and Śakti are inseparable, like water and its wetness, like fire and its power to burn. Brahman dwells in all beings as the *Vibhū*, the all-pervasive Consciousness. (K 568 / G 550)

Three features of this passage are worth noting. First, Sri Ramakrishna ascribes to Hājṛā the position that Śakti is a lower reality than the pure all-pervasive Consciousness. Second, he explicitly contrasts Hājṛā's position with his *own* view—"the teaching of this place"—that "Brahman and Śakti are inseparable." Third, Sri Ramakrishna indicates that his insight into the inseparability of Brahman and Śakti is based on his own experience of *vijñāna*, his direct realization that "Brahman dwells in all beings."

Similarly, in the entry from 27 October 1882, Sri Ramakrishna contrasts the Advaitic "*jñānī's*" view that "Śakti is unreal, like a dream" with his own view that "Brahman and Śakti are inseparable" (K 84 / G 134). Therefore, the main point of his teaching that Brahman and Śakti are "inseparable" is to grant equal ontological status to both Brahman and Śakti. From Sri Ramakrishna's standpoint of *vijñāna*, "That which is Brahman is also Śakti" (*jini brahma, tini śakti*): in other words, the static Brahman and the dynamic Śakti are equally real aspects of one and the same Divine Reality (K 379 / G 382). As he puts it, "When God is actionless [*niṣkriyā*], I call God 'Brahman'; when God creates, preserves, and destroys, I call God 'Śakti'" (K 861 / G 802).

Tellingly, all of the analogies Sri Ramakrishna employs to illustrate the inseparability of Brahman and Śakti also indicate their ontological parity. For instance, he compares the inseparability of Brahman and Śakti to fire and its power to burn (K 55 / G 108), milk and its whiteness (K 84 / G 134), the sun and its rays (K 84 / G 134), a gem and its brightness (K 254 / G 277), water and its wetness (K 269 / G 290), a snake and its wriggling motion (K 269 / G 290), and still water and agitated water (K 254 / G 277). In his explanation of these analogies, Sri Ramakrishna repeatedly emphasizes their bidirectionality. For instance, he explains his favorite analogy of fire and its power to burn as follows: "Brahman and Śakti are inseparable, like fire and its power to burn. When we talk of fire, we automatically mean also its power to burn. Again, the fire's power to burn implies the fire itself. If you accept the one, you must accept the other" (K 55 / G 108). Notice that he insists here on the analogy's bidirectionality: the concept of fire



entails its power to burn, and the fire's power to burn entails the concept of fire. Like fire and its power to burn, Brahman and Śakti mutually entail each other.

The bidirectionality of all these analogies clearly rules out an Advaitic interpretation of Sri Ramakrishna's doctrine of the inseparability of Brahman and Śakti. According to Advaita, Śakti is ontologically dependent on *nirguṇa* Brahman, but *nirguṇa* Brahman is not ontologically dependent on Śakti, since Śakti is ultimately unreal. Sri Ramakrishna, by contrast, teaches the mutual ontological dependence of Brahman and Śakti.<sup>54</sup> As he puts it, "one cannot think of Brahman without Śakti, or of Śakti without Brahman. One cannot think of the *nitya* without the *līlā*, or of the *līlā* without the *nitya*" (*K* 85 / *G* 134).

Sri Ramakrishna points out that his teachings on the infinitude of God are corroborated by the Vedas: "The Vedas teach that God is both with and without form, both personal and impersonal" (*K* 152 / *G* 191). Pursuing Sri Ramakrishna's hint, both Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo have shown that many of the Upaniṣads—such as Īśā, Kena, and Chāndogya—teach that God is at once personal and impersonal.<sup>55</sup> Similarly, George Thibaut argues that the Upaniṣads treat *nirguṇa* Brahman and *saguṇa* Brahman as equally real and hence do not support Śaṅkara's thesis that *saguṇa* Brahman is a "lower" reality.<sup>56</sup> More recently, Jaideva Singh has argued that the Upaniṣads accept the reality of both *nirguṇa* Brahman, "about which we can speak only in negative terms," and *saguṇa* Brahman, "the dynamic, creative Brahman known as *Sachchidananda*."<sup>57</sup> According to Sri Aurobindo, the *Gītā* also teaches that God is the infinite "*Puruṣottama*" who is both personal and impersonal, both immanent in the universe and beyond it.<sup>58</sup>

*Vijñāna Vedānta* 4 (VV4): There are two levels of Advaitic realization: while the *jñānī* realizes the acosmic nondual reality of *nirguṇa* Brahman in *nirvikalpa samādhi*, the *vijñānī* returns from the state of *nirvikalpa samādhi* and

54. A major problem with Oṃkārananda's Advaitic interpretation of Sri Ramakrishna's teaching that "Brahman and Śakti are inseparable" is that he fails to acknowledge the mutual ontological dependence of Brahman and Śakti. See Oṃkārananda, "*Brahma o Śakti abhed*," 230–31.

55. For Vivekananda's lectures on the Īśā and Chāndogya Upaniṣads, see *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, vol. 2, 144–54 and 309–27. See also Sri Aurobindo, *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, vol. 17: *Isha Upanishad* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 2003) and *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, vol. 18: *Kena and Other Upanishads* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 2001).

56. Śaṅkarācārya, *Vedānta-Sūtras with the Commentary by Śaṅkarācārya: Part I*, trans. and ed. George Thibaut (Oxford: Clarendon, 1890), cii–cxvi.

57. Jaideva Singh, *Vedānta and Advaita Shaivagama of Kashmir: A Comparative Study* (Kolkata: Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 1985).

58. See Sri Aurobindo's interpretation of the term *Puruṣottama* in chapter 15 of the *Gītā* in his *Essays on the Gita*, 435–49.

attains the richer, world-affirming nondual realization that God has become everything.

According to Sri Ramakrishna, the aim of the *jñānī* is to attain *brahmajñāna* in *nirvikalpa samādhi*. Like a “salt doll” melting into the ocean, the “I” of the *jñānī* in the state of *nirvikalpa samādhi* merges completely into nondual Brahman (*K* 50 / *G* 103). Hence, from the *jñānī*'s standpoint, “Brahman alone is the reality, and all else is unreal” (*K* 84 / *G* 133). The *jñānī*'s realization of nondual Brahman is clearly acosmic, since *jīva*, *jagat*, and *īśvara* (or *saguṇa* Brahman)—all of which imply subject-object duality—are not perceived. This *jñānī*, in other words, is a Śāṅkara Advaitin.

The *vijñānī*, however, returns to the empirical plane after the attainment of *brahmajñāna* and sees the universe anew as a “mansion of mirth”:

Who is the best devotee of God [*uttam bhakta*]? It is he who sees, after the realization of Brahman, that God alone has become all living beings, the universe, and the twenty-four cosmic principles. One must reason at first, saying “Not this, not this,” and reach the roof. After that, one realizes that the steps are made of the same materials as the roof—namely, brick, lime, and brick-dust. The *bhakta* realizes that it is Brahman alone that has become all these: the living beings, the universe, and so on. Mere dry reasoning—I spit on it! I have no use for it! [Sri Ramakrishna spits on the ground.] Why should I make myself dry through mere reasoning? . . . *Caitanya* [Consciousness] is awakened after *advaitajñāna* [knowledge of Advaita]. Then one perceives that God alone exists in all beings as Consciousness. After this realization comes *Ananda* [Bliss]. *Advaita*, *Caitanya*, *Nityānanda*. (*K* 247 / *G* 271–72)

Whereas the *jñānī* attains “*advaitajñāna*” in *nirvikalpa samādhi*, the *vijñānī*—the “*uttam bhakta*”—goes on to attain the even greater realization that Consciousness (“*caitanya*”) pervades the entire universe, which in turn results in “*nityānanda*,” a state of divine bliss in which one sees and experiences nothing but God.

Interestingly, Sri Ramakrishna elsewhere clarifies that the *vijñānī*'s realization of God in everything is a distinct form of Advaitic realization: “The *bhakta* also has a realization of oneness [*ekākār jñān*]; he sees that there is nothing but God. Instead of saying that the world is unreal like a dream, he says that God has become everything” (*K* 740 / *G* 700). After attaining *brahmajñāna* in *nirvikalpa samādhi*, the *vijñānī* returns to the relative plane and realizes that God is not only *nirguṇa* but also *saguṇa* and that God, as Śakti, has become *jīva*, *jagat*, and the twenty-four cosmic principles.<sup>59</sup> At one point, Sri Ramakrishna's invokes the

59. Accordingly, Sharma aptly characterizes Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy as “*Vijñanadvaita*” (*Ramakrishna and Vivekananda*, 42).

analogy of wax to explain his own vision of the universe from the standpoint of *viññāna*: “Do you know what I see right now? I see that it is God Himself who has become all this. . . . I had a similar vision once before, when I saw houses, gardens, roads, men, cattle—all made of One Substance; it was as if they were all made of wax [*sab momer*]” (*K* 1022 / *G* 941–92). The analogy of wax aptly captures the fact that the *viññānī* realizes not only that Brahman is *immanent* in all creation but also that all names and forms are themselves nothing but the same Brahman.

It is also evident from Sri Ramakrishna’s question, “Why should I make myself dry through mere reasoning?” that he prefers the *viññānī*’s richer, world-affirming Advaitic realization to the “dry” *jñānī*’s world-negating Advaitic realization. According to Sri Ramakrishna, the world-denying outlook of Advaita Vedānta is based on a valid but intermediate stage of spiritual realization, which is surpassed by the *viññānī*’s realization that God alone exists and that everything in the universe is God sporting in various forms.

Sri Ramakrishna’s *Vijñāna Vedānta*, then, is a *world-affirming* Advaitic philosophy that contrasts sharply with Śāṅkara’s world-denying Advaita Vedānta. For Śāṅkara, the sole reality is the impersonal nondual Brahman, so *jīva*, *jagat*, and *īśvara* are all ultimately unreal. For Sri Ramakrishna, by contrast, the sole reality is the Infinite Divine Reality, which is equally the impersonal Brahman and the personal Śakti. Unlike Śāṅkara, Sri Ramakrishna maintains that both *jīva* and *jagat* are *real* manifestations of Śakti, which is itself an ontologically real aspect of the Infinite Reality.

As numerous commentators have noted, there are many passages in the Upaniṣads that lend strong support to Sri Ramakrishna’s teachings on the world-affirming Advaitic realization of the *viññānī*. For instance, both Svāmī Śraddhānanda and Chatterjee have pointed out that “*sarvaṃ khalvidaṃ brahma*” (“All this is indeed Brahman”), the well-known statement from Chāndogya Upaniṣad 3.14.1, is much more convincingly interpreted from Sri Ramakrishna’s standpoint of *viññāna* than from Śāṅkara’s world-negating Advaitic standpoint.<sup>60</sup> As Chatterjee points out, Advaitins deny the reality of the universe, so they have to maintain that “there is no all but only Brahman,” thereby distorting the natural meaning of the Upaniṣadic statement.<sup>61</sup> By contrast, from Sri Ramakrishna’s perspective, “*sarvaṃ khalvidaṃ brahma*” means that everything in the universe actually *is* “Brahman in different forms.”<sup>62</sup>

60. See Chatterjee, *Classical Indian Philosophies*, 112–13 and Śraddhānanda, 135–41.

61. Chatterjee, *Classical Indian Philosophies*, 112. See also Śāṅkara’s interpretation of “*sarvaṃ khalvidaṃ brahma*” in his commentary on *Brahmasūtra* 1.3.1.

62. Chatterjee, *Classical Indian Philosophies*, 112.

Similarly, Sri Aurobindo argues that the *Gītā*, far from dismissing the world as unreal, in fact teaches “real Advaita,” the “utmost undividing Monism” which “sees the one as the one even in the multiplicities of Nature,”<sup>63</sup> as in 7.19, which declares that “Vāsudeva is everything” (*vāsudevaḥ sarvam*). Sri Aurobindo's conception of the “real Advaita” of the *Gītā* bears obvious affinities with—and, indeed, is partly indebted to—Sri Ramakrishna's teachings on the world-affirming Advaitic realization of the *vijñānī*.<sup>64</sup>

*Vijñāna Vedānta* 5 (VV5): The *vijñānī*, who accepts the reality of both the *nitya* and the *lilā*, is able to adopt various attitudes toward—and attain various forms of union with—God on different planes of consciousness, all of which are true.

According to Sri Ramakrishna, the Advaitic *jñānī* only accepts the reality of the “*nitya*”—that is, *nirguṇa* Brahman—and therefore dismisses the “*lilā*,” God's sportive manifestation as *jīva* (“soul”) and *jagat* (“universe”), as unreal. *Jñānīs*, as he puts it, “arrive at the *nitya*, the Indivisible *Saccidānanda*, through the process of ‘*neti, neti*.’ They reason in this manner: ‘Brahman is not the *jīvas*, nor the *jagat*, nor the twenty-four cosmic principles’” (*K* 479 / *G* 476). By contrast, *vijñānīs*, “after attaining the *nitya*, realize that Brahman has become all this—the *jīvas*, the *jagat*, and the twenty-four cosmic principles” (*K* 479 / *G* 477). Sri Ramakrishna describes the unique state of the *vijñānī* as follows: “The *vijñānī* always sees God. . . . He sees God even with his eyes open. Sometimes he comes down to the *lilā* from the *nitya*, and sometimes he goes up to the *nitya* from the *lilā*” (*K* 479 / *G* 477). While the *jñānī* realizes the *nitya* only in the state of *nirvikalpa samādhi*, the *vijñānī* has the more comprehensive realization that both the *nitya* and the *lilā* are real aspects of God, so the *vijñānī* comes down from the plane of *nirvikalpa samādhi* and sees that it is God alone who sports in the form of *jīva* and *jagat*.

Shortly thereafter, Sri Ramakrishna makes clear that he prefers the *vijñānī*'s many-sided and all-embracing attitude to the *jñānī*'s one-sided acceptance of the *nitya* alone: “A mere *jñānī* trembles with fear. . . . A mere *jñānī* is one-sided and monotonous [*ekgheye*]. He always reasons, ‘It is not this, not this. The world is like a dream.’ But I have raised both my hands. Therefore, I accept everything. . . . I am not afraid of anything. I accept both the *nitya* and the *lilā*” (*K* 482 / *G* 479). Explicitly adopting the standpoint of the *vijñānī*, Sri Ramakrishna accepts the reality of both the *nitya* and the *lilā* and is hence able to move fearlessly from the *nitya* to the *lilā* as well as from the *lilā* to the *nitya*. Elsewhere, he declares

63. Sri Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita*, 448.

64. See Maharaj, “Toward a New Hermeneutics of the *Bhagavad Gītā*.”

unequivocally that “the *lilā* is real” and that “it is good to remain on the plane of the *lilā* after reaching the *nitya*” (*K* 205 / *G* 238). Employing the analogy of a flute, Sri Ramakrishna states that while the *jñānī* produces “only a monotone on his flute,” the *viññānī* creates “waves of melodies in different *rāgas* and *rāginīs*.” He then explains that the *viññānī* is able to enjoy various relationships with God: “Why should I produce only a monotone when I have an instrument with seven holes? Why should I say nothing but, ‘I am He, I am He’? I want to play various melodies on my instrument with seven holes. Why should I say only, ‘Brahman! Brahman!’? I want to call on God through all the moods—through *śānta*, *dāsyā*, *sakhya*, *vātsalya*, and *madhura*. I want to make merry with God. I want to sport with God” (*K* 1098–99 / *G* 1009–10).

From the subjective standpoint, Sri Ramakrishna explains that the *viññānī* or *īśvarakoṭi*, in contrast to the ordinary *jīva*, is able to commune with God on various planes of consciousness:

The gross, the subtle, the causal, and the Great Cause [*sthūla*, *sūkṣma*, *kāraṇa*, *mahākāraṇa*]. Entering the *mahākāraṇa*, one becomes silent; one cannot utter a word. But an *īśvarakoṭi*, after attaining the *mahākāraṇa*, can return again. Incarnations of God, and others like them, belong to the class of the *īśvarakoṭis*. They climb up, and they can also come down. (*K* 581–82 / *G* 562)

The *mahākāraṇa* plane of consciousness corresponds to the state of *nirvikalpa samādhi*, from which the ordinary *jīva* is unable to return to the relative plane. By contrast, the *īśvarakoṭi* can descend from the *mahākāraṇa* plane to the *sthūla*, *sūkṣma*, and *kāraṇa* planes, thereby communing with God on all planes of consciousness. The *jñānī* accepts the *mahākāraṇa* plane alone as real and dismisses the *sthūla*, *sūkṣma*, and *kāraṇa* planes as unreal. The *viññānī* or *īśvarakoṭi*, however, accepts all four planes of consciousness as true, since the *sthūla*, *sūkṣma*, and *kāraṇa* planes belong to the realm of God’s *lilā*, which is also real.

Sri Ramakrishna frequently mentioned that Hanumān was a *viññānī* who reveled in adopting multiple attitudes toward his chosen deity, Rāma:

God keeps in many people the “ego of a *jñānī*” or the “ego of a *bhaktā*” even after they have attained *brahmajñāna*. Hanumān, after realizing God in both His personal and His impersonal aspects, cherished toward God the attitude of a servant, a devotee. He said to Rāma: “O Rāma, sometimes I think that You are the whole and I am a part of You. Sometimes I think that You are the Master and I am Your servant. And sometimes, Rāma, when I contemplate the Absolute, I see that I am You and You are I.” (*K* 483 / *G* 480)

Sri Ramakrishna paraphrases here a well-known Sanskrit verse: “When I identify with the body, I say, ‘I am Your Servant.’ When I identify with the *jīvātman*, I say, ‘I am a part of You.’ And when I identify with the Supreme Ātman, I say, ‘I am You’” (*dehabuddhyā dāso’ham, jīvabuddhyā tvadamśakaḥ; ātmabuddhyā tvamevāham iti me nīcitā matiḥ*). It might be tempting to interpret this verse in terms of Śāṅkara Advaita: while the attitudes of the *bhakta* are valid from the *vyāvahārika* standpoint—so long as one ignorantly identifies with the body or *jīvātman*—only the *jñānī*’s attitude of absolute identity with God is true from the *pāramārthika* standpoint, since it is based on the knowledge of one’s true nature as the nondual Ātman. However, the contexts in which Sri Ramakrishna invokes Hanumān’s statement to Rāma rule out this Advaitic interpretation. Crucially, Sri Ramakrishna refers to Hanumān repeatedly as an “*īśvarakoṭī*” who has reached the state of *vijñāna* after attaining Advaitic *brahmajñāna*.<sup>65</sup> Hence, from Sri Ramakrishna’s perspective, Hanumān’s remark to Rāma embodies not the one-sided attitude of the *jñānī* but the all-embracing attitude of the *vijñānī*, who is able to descend from the *nitya* to the *līlā* and ascend from the *līlā* to the *nitya* at will. Indeed, Sri Ramakrishna declares, on the basis of his own spiritual experience, that the *vijñānī*’s ability to enjoy and commune with God in various ways is the summit of spiritual realization: “I have come to the final realization that God is the Whole and I am a part of Him, that God is the Master and I am His servant. Furthermore, I think every now and then that He is I and I am He” (*K* 594 / *G* 638).

Sri Ramakrishna’s acceptance of various relationships with God as equally true finds support in the Upaniṣads, which express the relation between the *jīva* and Brahman in numerous ways, without favoring one particular relationship as the only ultimately true one. For instance, while Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad 2.5 characterizes *jīvas* as “children of Immortality” (*amṛtasya putrāḥ*),<sup>66</sup> Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 3.7.15 describes Brahman as the “*antaryāmi*” (Inner Controller) inhabiting “all beings,” who constitute the “body” (*śarīram*) of Brahman.<sup>67</sup> Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad employs two striking analogies to explain the relationship between the *jīvas* and Brahman: according to 2.1.1, *jīvas* emerge from Akṣara Brahman like “sparks” (*visphulingāḥ*) from a fire,<sup>68</sup> while in 3.1.1, the *jīva* and Brahman are

65. See Sri Ramakrishna’s references to Hanumān as an “*īśvarakoṭī*” or a “*vijñānī*” in the *Kathāmṛta* entries from 3 Aug. 1884, 14 Dec. 1884, 1 Mar. 1885, 12 Apr. 1885, 24 Apr. 1885, 15 Jul. 1885, 18 Oct. 1885.

66. Śāṅkarācārya, *Īśādi nau upaniṣad: Śāṅkarabhāṣyārtha* (Gorakhpur: Gita Press, 2011), 1199.

67. Śāṅkarācārya, *The Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad with the Commentary of Śāṅkarācārya*, trans. Swami Madhavananda (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2009), 352.

68. Śāṅkarācārya, *Eight Upaniṣads with the Commentary of Śāṅkarācārya*, vol. 2, 107.



likened to “two birds that are intimately akin” (*dvā suparṇā sayujā sakhāyā*).<sup>69</sup> By contrast, the well-known *mahāvākyas* from Chāndogya Upaniṣad 6.8.7 (*tat tvam asi*)<sup>70</sup> and Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad 1.4.10 (*ahaṃ brahmāsmi*) seem to express the absolute identity of the *jīva* and Brahman.<sup>71</sup>

Sri Aurobindo argues that the *Gītā* also teaches numerous modes of uniting with Brahman, all of which are true and salvific. For Sri Aurobindo, “The liberation of the Gita . . . is all kinds of union at once”—including *sāyujya*, *sālokya*, *sādrśya*, and *sāmīpya*—since we can achieve absolute Advaitic identity with the *nirguṇa* aspect of God, but we can also attain various forms of union with God’s other aspects, *saguṇa* and otherwise.<sup>72</sup> As Sri Aurobindo puts it, “the Gita envelops” all these forms of union with God “in its catholic integrality and fuses them all into one greatest and richest divine freedom and perfection.”<sup>73</sup>

*Vijñāna Vedānta* 6 (VV6): Various religious faiths and spiritual philosophies are salvifically efficacious paths to realizing God.

As I will demonstrate at length in chapter 3, Sri Ramakrishna’s spiritual standpoint of *vijñāna* furnishes the basis for a robust religious pluralism. He makes this clear in the following remark: “The *vijñānī* sees that the Reality which is *nirguṇa* is also *saguṇa*. . . . The *jñānī*’s path leads to Truth, as does the path that combines *jñāna* and *bhakti*. The *bhaktā*’s path, too, leads to Truth. *Jñānayoga* is true, and *bhaktiyoga* is true. God can be realized through all paths” (*K* 51 / *G* 103–4). From the *vijñānī*’s standpoint, the personal (*saguṇa*) and impersonal (*nirguṇa*) aspects of the Infinite Reality are equally real, so both theistic and nontheistic spiritual paths have equal salvific efficacy.

In other words, VV6 follows directly from VV3: since God is infinite—both personal and impersonal, with and without form, immanent and transcendent—there must be correspondingly infinite ways of approaching and ultimately realizing God. As Sri Ramakrishna succinctly puts it, “God is infinite, and the paths to God are infinite” (*tinī ananta, patho ananta*) (*K* 511 / *G* 506). For Sri Ramakrishna, the infinite impersonal-personal God is conceived and worshipped in different ways by people of varying temperaments, preferences, and worldviews. Hence, a sincere practitioner of any religion can realize God in

69. Śaṅkarācārya, *Eight Upaniṣads*, vol. 2, p. 137.

70. Śaṅkarācārya, *Chāndogya Upaniṣad with the Commentary of Śaṅkarācārya*, trans. Swami Gambhirananda (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2006), 468.

71. Śaṅkarācārya, *The Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, 100.

72. Sri Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita*, 398.

73. Sri Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita*, 398.

the particular form he or she prefers. Nontheistic spiritual practitioners, such as Advaitins and most Buddhists, can realize the impersonal aspect of the Infinite Reality. Sri Ramakrishna adds, however, that *bhaktas* who believe in the personal God—whether Hindu, Christian, Muslim, or otherwise—can realize the same Infinite Reality as “eternally endowed with form and personality” (*nitya sākār*) (*K* 152 / *G* 191).<sup>74</sup> From Sri Ramakrishna's standpoint of *vijñāna*, both theistic and nontheistic spiritual practitioners attain the goal of God-realization, even though they end up realizing different aspects or forms of one and the same Infinite Reality.

There are numerous scriptural sources for Sri Ramakrishna's teachings on religious pluralism. Sri Ramakrishna's idea that all religions and spiritual philosophies concern one and the same God, but in different forms and called by different names, can be traced as far back to the well-known statement from Ṛg Veda 1.64.46, “*ekaṃ sad viprā babudhā vadanti*” (“The Reality is one; sages speak of It variously”). Moreover, Sri Ramakrishna's teaching that numerous spiritual doctrines and paths are equally valid means of realizing God finds support in verses of the *Gītā* such as 13.24, “Some realize the Ātman within themselves through *dhyānayoga*; others through *sāṃkhyayoga*, and still others through *karmayoga*.” What is perhaps unprecedented is Sri Ramakrishna's own practice of Hindu, Christian, and Islamic faiths, on the experiential basis of which he proclaimed the harmony of all the world religions.

#### IV. Beyond “Neo-Vedānta”: Implications of Sri Ramakrishna's Philosophy of *Vijñāna* for Discourse on Modern Vedānta

The remaining seven chapters of this book will explore the far-reaching implications of Sri Ramakrishna's unique standpoint of *vijñāna* for cross-cultural philosophy of religion. However, Sri Ramakrishna's *Vijñāna Vedānta* also has major implications for a number of other fields, including religious studies, Hindu studies, and Indology. While it is beyond the scope of this book to elaborate these implications in detail, I will indicate briefly in this section how Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy of *Vijñāna Vedānta* helps challenge one of the dominant hermeneutic paradigms for understanding modern Vedāntic thought.

Many scholars apply the label “Neo-Vedānta” to the Vedāntic philosophies of modern Indian figures such as Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, and Sri Aurobindo.<sup>75</sup> I would argue, however, that the category

74. It is worth noting that Sri Ramakrishna's statement about a *bhakta*'s realization of the “*nitya sākār*” form of God suggests that Advaitic *nirvikalpa samādhi* is not necessary for spiritual salvation.

75. Paul Hacker was the first to apply the label “Neo-Vedānta” to the views of Swami Vivekananda, Radhakrishnan, and Sri Aurobindo. Significantly, however, Hacker did not



of “Neo-Vedānta” is misleading and unhelpful for three main reasons. First, a vague umbrella term such as “Neo-Vedānta” fails to capture the nuances of the specific Vedāntic views of different modern figures. For instance, the term occludes the important philosophical differences between Sri Ramakrishna’s Vijñāna Vedānta, Sri Aurobindo’s Integral Vedānta, and Radhakrishnan’s ethically oriented Vedāntic philosophy. We can better honor the distinctiveness and specificity of different modern Vedāntic views by resisting the impulse to lump them all into a single catch-all category.

Second, the term “Neo-Vedānta” misleadingly implies novelty. Indeed, some scholars even imbue the prefix “Neo” in “Neo-Vedānta” with a normative valence by implying that modern Vedāntic philosophies represent a deviation or break from traditional Vedānta.<sup>76</sup> However, as I have shown in this chapter, the aim of at least some modern Vedāntins—including Sri Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, and Sri Aurobindo—was not to promulgate a *new* Vedāntic philosophy but to recover and revive the original Vedānta embodied in traditional Indian scriptures such as the Upaniṣads and the *Bhagavad Gītā*.<sup>77</sup> Of course, one might question the success of these interpretive efforts and even try to show how these modern thinkers sometimes imposed their own views onto the scriptures. However, it would be both unrigorous and uncharitable to presuppose from the outset that the

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consider Sri Ramakrishna to be a Neo-Vedāntin. See Paul Hacker, “Aspects of Neo-Hinduism as Contrasted with Surviving Traditional Hinduism,” in *Philology and Confrontation: Paul Hacker on Traditional and Modern Vedānta*, ed. Wilhelm Halbfass (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), 229–56. More recent scholars who continue to use the framework of “Neo-Vedānta” include Wilhelm Halbfass and Andrew Fort. See Wilhelm Halbfass, “Introduction, an Uncommon Orientalist: Paul Hacker’s Passage to India,” in *Philology and Confrontation*, ed. Halbfass, 8–9, and Wilhelm Halbfass, “Research and Reflection: Responses to my Respondents, III: Issues of Comparative Philosophy,” in *Beyond Orientalism: The Work of Wilhelm Halbfass and Its Impact on Indian and Cross-Cultural Studies*, ed. Eli Franco and Karin Preisendanz (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2007), 307. See also Andrew Fort, “*Jīvanmukti* and Social Service in Advaita and Neo-Vedānta,” in *Beyond Orientalism*, ed. Franco and Preisendanz, 489–504. As indicated in note 13 above, both Swami Tapasyananda and Jeffery Long refer to Sri Ramakrishna’s philosophy as “Neo-Vedānta,” although neither of them uses the term in Hacker’s sense. Satis Chandra Chatterjee also refers to the philosophies of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda as “Neo-Vedantism” in his article “Vivekananda’s Neo-Vedantism and Its Practical Application,” in *Vivekananda: The Great Spiritual Teacher* (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 1995), 255–80.

76. See, for instance, Fort’s argument about Neo-Vedānta in “*Jīvanmukti* and Social Service in Advaita and Neo-Vedānta.”

77. See Maharaj, “Toward a New Hermeneutics of the *Bhagavad Gītā*,” which examines Sri Aurobindo’s interpretation of the *Gītā*, and Maharaj, “*Asminnasya ca tadyogam śāsti*,” which discusses Swami Vivekananda’s interpretation of the *prasthānatrayī*. See also Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan’s interpretation of the *prasthānatrayī* in works such as the following: “The Philosophy of the Upaniṣads,” in Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923), 106–220; *The Bhagavadgita* (New Delhi: HarperCollins, [1928] 2010); and *The Brahma Sūtra: The Philosophy of Spiritual Life* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1960).

Vedāntic philosophies propounded by modern Indian thinkers are not, in fact, continuous with traditional Vedānta. Therefore, the “Neo” in “Neo-Vedānta” is presumptuous at best.

Third, and most problematically, the term “Neo-Vedānta” is indelibly colored by the German indologist Paul Hacker’s polemical use of the term. According to Hacker, Neo-Vedānta is an outgrowth of what he calls “Neo-Hinduism,” an ideology espoused by modern Indian figures as diverse as Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo, Radhakrishnan, and Mahatma Gandhi. Neo-Hinduism, Hacker argues, is not an authentically Indian tradition but an ideology tacitly shaped by Western values.<sup>78</sup> In Hacker’s view, Neo-Hindus mistakenly clothe what are essentially Western values and ideals in superficially Indian garb in order to promote Indian nationalism.<sup>79</sup> While Hacker does not consider Sri Ramakrishna to be a Neo-Hindu,<sup>80</sup> he contends that figures such as Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo did have a Neo-Hindu agenda.<sup>81</sup> Hacker claims, for instance, that Sri Aurobindo’s *Essays on the Gita* has many tacitly Western elements which he may have borrowed from the Neo-Hindu Bankimcandra Chattopādhyāy, whose ideas were themselves shaped by Western values.<sup>82</sup> Similarly, Hacker argues that Vivekananda’s derivation of a humanitarian ethics from the Upaniṣadic teaching “*tat tvam asi*” was inspired by Paul Deussen’s interpretation of Schopenhauer’s philosophy.<sup>83</sup>

This is not the place for a detailed critical assessment of Hacker’s highly controversial theses about Neo-Hinduism and Neo-Vedānta. Moreover, several scholars have already identified major problems with Hacker’s conception of Neo-Hinduism, many of which can be traced to his own Christian agenda.<sup>84</sup>

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78. Hacker, “Aspects of Neo-Hinduism,” 251.

79. Hacker, “Aspects of Neo-Hinduism,” 251.

80. See Hacker’s brief discussion of Sri Ramakrishna in “Aspects of Neo-Hinduism,” 234–35.

81. Hacker, “Aspects of Neo-Hinduism,” and Hacker, “Schopenhauer and Hindu Ethics,” in *Philology and Confrontation*, ed. Halbfass, 273–318.

82. See Hacker’s discussion of Sri Aurobindo in “Aspects of Neo-Hinduism,” 238–39.

83. See Hacker’s Neo-Vedāntic interpretation of Swami Vivekananda in “Aspects of Neo-Hinduism,” 239–41 and in “Schopenhauer and Hindu Ethics.”

84. Criticisms of certain aspects of Hacker’s theory of Neo-Hinduism can be found in Halbfass, “Introduction,” 8–9, and Andrew Nicholson, *Unifying Hinduism: Philosophy and Identity in Indian Intellectual History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 187–88. See also the following recent critiques of Hacker’s Neo-Vedāntic interpretation of Swami Vivekananda: Andrew Nicholson, “Vivekananda’s Non-Dual Ethics in the History of Vedānta,” in *The Life, Legacy, and Contemporary Relevance of Swami Vivekananda: New Reflections*, ed. Rita Sherma and James McHugh (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, forthcoming), and James Madaio, “Rethinking Neo-Vedānta: Swami Vivekananda and the Selective Historiography of Advaita Vedānta,” *Religions* 8 (2017), 1–12.

I will only indicate briefly how Sri Ramakrishna's Vedāntic perspective problematizes Hacker's understanding of Neo-Hinduism and Neo-Vedānta, key aspects of which continue to be defended by a number of scholars.<sup>85</sup>

Hacker's telling concession that Sri Ramakrishna was *not* a Neo-Hindu, I contend, undermines his own thesis about Neo-Hinduism in general. If we can establish that key philosophical doctrines of some of the modern Indian figures Hacker considers to be Neo-Hindu were significantly influenced by Sri Ramakrishna, then Hacker's sweeping argument about the Western provenance of Neo-Vedānta collapses. Hacker's Neo-Hindu thesis is especially shaky in the case of Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo, whose views were strongly shaped by Sri Ramakrishna.

Since Hacker presents absolutely no evidence of Bāṅkimcandra's influence on Sri Aurobindo's *Essays on the Gita*, Hacker's Neo-Hindu interpretation of Sri Aurobindo rests on little more than baseless speculation. By contrast, there is abundant evidence that Sri Ramakrishna strongly influenced both the life and thought of Sri Aurobindo.<sup>86</sup> More specifically, I have argued in a recent article that Sri Aurobindo's basic hermeneutic framework for interpreting the *Bhagavad Gītā* derives from Sri Ramakrishna's teachings on *vijñāna*.<sup>87</sup> Contrary to Hacker, then, there is substantial evidence that Sri Aurobindo's *Essays on the Gita* was influenced much more by Sri Ramakrishna than by Bāṅkimcandra.

In a recent article, Andrew Nicholson has challenged Hacker's Neo-Hindu interpretation of Vivekananda on similar grounds. Nicholson makes a convincing case that the chief source of Vivekananda's Vedāntic ethics was not Deussen's Schopenhauer, as Hacker alleges, but Vivekananda's "beloved teacher Ramakrishna."<sup>88</sup> According to Nicholson, Sri Ramakrishna taught a "world-affirming Advaita" that has much greater affinities with medieval Indian *bhakti*-oriented Advaitic traditions such as Śaiva and Śākta Tantra than with Śāṅkara's world-denying Advaita Vedānta.<sup>89</sup> As Nicholson puts it, it was the

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85. Halbfass, for instance, seems to accept the descriptive aspect of Hacker's theory of Neo-Hinduism and Neo-Vedānta, while rejecting Hacker's normative claims about the "inauthenticity" of Neo-Vedāntins. See Halbfass, "Introduction," 8–9, and Halbfass, "Research and Reflection," 307. Fort also employs the framework of "Neo-Vedānta" in a manner similar to Hacker in "*Jīvanmukti* and Social Service in Advaita and Neo-Vedānta."

86. For details on Sri Ramakrishna's influence on Sri Aurobindo, see section I of chapter 4 and Maharaj, "Toward a New Hermeneutics of the *Bhagavad Gītā*," 1211–14.

87. Maharaj, "Toward a New Hermeneutics of the *Bhagavad Gītā*."

88. Nicholson, "Vivekananda's Non-Dual Ethics in the History of Vedānta," 5.

89. Nicholson, "Vivekananda's Non-Dual Ethics in the History of Vedānta," 6.

“second millenium understanding of Advaita, combined with non-dual tantric traditions, that together shaped both Ramakrishna and Vivekananda's thought.”<sup>90</sup>

Nicholson has gone a long way toward refuting Hacker's Neo-Hindu interpretation of Vivekananda's Vedāntic philosophy. However, we can make Nicholson's case for Sri Ramakrishna's influence on Vivekananda's Vedāntic ethics even stronger by taking into account Sri Ramakrishna's teachings on *vijñāna*. I have contended in this chapter that Sri Ramakrishna's world-affirming Advaitic philosophy was shaped primarily by his own diverse religious practices and spiritual experiences, particularly his unique experience of *vijñāna*.

Tellingly, on one occasion in 1884, Sri Ramakrishna was explaining to his visitors—including Narendra, who later went on to become Swami Vivekananda—that one of the main religious practices of Vaiṣṇavas is “showing compassion to all beings” (*sarva jīve dayā*) (LP II.ii.131 / DP 852). Suddenly, just after uttering this phrase, Sri Ramakrishna went into a deep state of *samādhi*. After a while, he came down to a semicstatic state and said: “How foolish to speak of compassion! Human beings are as insignificant as worms crawling on the earth—and they are to show compassion to others? That's absurd. It must not be compassion, but service to all. Serve them, knowing that they are all manifestations of God [*śivajñāne jīver sevā*]” (LP II.i.131 / DP 852). From the standpoint of *vijñāna*, God actually manifests in the form of human beings, so one serves God by serving others. Sri Ramakrishna's teaching affected the young Narendra so deeply that he took his friends aside shortly thereafter and explained its profound ethical significance to them:

What Ṭhākura [Sri Ramakrishna] said today in his ecstatic mood is clear: One can bring Vedānta from the forest to the home and practice it in daily life. Let people continue with whatever they are doing; there's no harm in this. People must first fully believe and be convinced that God has manifested Himself before them as the world and its creatures [*īśvarī jīva o jagat rūpe tāhār sammukhe prakāśita rohiyāchen*]. . . . If people consider everyone to be God, how can they consider themselves to be superior to others and harbor attachment, hatred, arrogance—or even compassion [*dayā*]—toward them? Their minds will become pure as they serve all beings as God, and soon they will experience themselves as parts of the blissful God. They will realize that their true nature is pure, illumined, and free. (LP II.ii.131 / DP 852)

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90. Nicholson, “Vivekananda's Non-Dual Ethics in the History of Vedānta,” 8.

Here we have strong evidence that Vivekananda's Vedāntic ethics of serving God in human beings was directly inspired by Sri Ramakrishna's *vijñāna*-based ethical teaching. Moreover, the fact that Narendra arrived at this ethical insight in 1884 definitively rules out Hacker's thesis that Vivekananda developed his Vedāntic ethics only after he met Deussen in 1896.

In this brief section, I have begun to show how Sri Ramakrishna's framework of Vijñāna Vedānta can help motivate a more nuanced and hermeneutically sophisticated paradigm for interpreting modern Vedāntic thought than Hacker's reductive paradigm of Neo-Vedānta. In the remainder of this book, I will explore how Sri Ramakrishna's spiritual standpoint of *vijñāna* makes available compelling new approaches to central issues in cross-cultural philosophy of religion.

## 2

## A CROSS-CULTURAL INQUIRY INTO DIVINE INFINITUDE

## SRI RAMAKRISHNA, PARAConsistency, AND THE OVERCOMING OF CONCEPTUAL IDOLATRY

The infinitude of God has been a prominent topic in both Indian and Western philosophical and theological discourse. Numerous Indian scriptures—including the Upaniṣads, the *Bhagavad Gītā*, and the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*—refer to the Supreme Reality as “infinite” (*ananta*). Taittirīya Upaniṣad 2.1.1 famously describes Brahman as “*satyaṃ jñānam anantam*” (“Reality, Consciousness, Infinite”).<sup>1</sup> In Chapter 11 of the *Gītā*, Arjuna describes Krishna as “The Infinite” (*ananta*)<sup>2</sup> and as “The One of Infinite Forms” (*anantarūpa*).<sup>3</sup> Later Indian philosophers such as Śāṅkara and Rāmānuja interpreted scriptural references to divine infinitude in a variety of ways, depending on their respective conceptual frameworks.

In contrast to the Indian scriptures, the Bible never refers to God as infinite.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, numerous Christian theologians—including Gregory of Nyssa, Thomas Aquinas, John Duns Scotus, and Nicholas of Cusa—argued that the biblical conception of God implies God’s infinitude.<sup>5</sup> However, these Christian theologians, like their Indian

1. Śāṅkarācārya, *Eight Upaniṣads with the Commentary of Śāṅkarācārya*, vol. 1, trans. Swami Gambhirananda (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 1989), 303.

2. *Bhagavad Gītā* 11.37. *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā Śāṅkarabhāṣya Hindī-anuvādasahita* (Gorakhpur: Gita Press, 2012), 275.

3. *Bhagavad Gītā* 11.38. Śāṅkarācārya, *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā*, 276. For other references to divine infinitude in the *Gītā*, see 11.11, 11.19, and 11.40.

4. As Wolfhart Pannenberg observes, “Infinity is not a biblical term for God. It is implied, however, in many biblical descriptions of God, and especially clearly in the attributes of eternity, omnipotence, and omnipresence that are ascribed to him.” *Systematic Theology*: vol. 1, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (London: T & T Clark, [1994] 2004), 397.

5. See Albert-Kees Geljon, “Divine Infinity in Gregory of Nyssa and Philo of Alexandria,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 59.2 (May 2005), 152–77; Salvatore Lilla, “The

counterparts, interpreted divine infinity in numerous ways. More recently, analytic philosophers of religion such as Richard Swinburne, Brian Leftow, and Graham Oppy have continued to discuss the nature and philosophical implications of divine infinity.<sup>6</sup>

Although Western and Indian inquiries into divine infinity have run parallel to each other for almost two millennia, virtually no cross-cultural work has been done to bring these two traditions into dialogue. This chapter initiates this important cross-cultural project by exploring how Sri Ramakrishna's approach to God can serve as a conceptual bridge between Indian and Western discourse on divine infinity.

Section I brings Sri Ramakrishna into conversation with three Vedāntic philosophers: the Advaitin Śaṅkara, the Viśiṣṭādvaitin Rāmānuja, and the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava Viśvanātha Cakravartin. While Śaṅkara takes the *anantatā* of Brahman to indicate its impersonal and nondual nature, Rāmānuja interprets *anantatā* as an attribute of the personal God. Viśvanātha's broader conception of divine infinity reconciles, to a certain extent, Śaṅkara's impersonalism and Rāmānuja's personalism. I argue, however, that Sri Ramakrishna goes even further than Viśvanātha by harmonizing Śaṅkara's impersonalism and Rāmānuja's personalism from the nonsectarian standpoint of Vijñāna Vedānta. While Viśvanātha subordinates the impersonal Brahman to the personal God Kṛṣṇa, Sri Ramakrishna accords equal ontological status to the impersonal and personal aspects of the Infinite Divine Reality.

Section II outlines the views on divine infinity of the medieval Christian theologians John Duns Scotus and Nicholas of Cusa. According to Scotus, God is infinite in the sense that He has infinite being and possesses attributes such as omniscience and omnipotence to an infinite degree. Cusa, however, interprets God's infinity in a much more radical manner. For Cusa, God is infinite in the sense that He is the *coincidentia oppositorum* ("coincidence of opposites"), which exceeds the grasp of the finite human intellect. While recent analytic philosophers of religion have tended to adopt the Scotistic approach to divine infinity, Sri Ramakrishna conceives God's infinity in a manner that brings him much closer to Cusa than to Scotus. I contend, from a Ramakrishnan perspective, that

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Notion of Infinity in Ps.-Dionysius Areopagita," *Journal of Theological Studies* 31.1 (April 1980), 93–103; Dermot Moran, "Nicholas of Cusa and Modern Philosophy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Philosophy*, ed. James Hankins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 173–92; Christian Tapp, "Infinity in Aquinas' Doctrine of God," in *Analytically Oriented Thomism*, ed. Miroslaw Szatkowski (Neunkirchen-Seelscheid, Germany: Editiones Scholasticae, 2016), 93–115.

6. For references, see notes 47–50 below.



analytic philosophers can deepen and radicalize their understanding of divine infinity by exploring a Cusaean approach.

Section III develops this argument further by bringing Sri Ramakrishna into dialogue with the contemporary analytic theologian Benedikt Paul Göcke. In several recent articles, Göcke has challenged the mainstream analytic approach to divine infinity by developing Cusa's radical doctrine of God as the *coincidentia oppositorum*. According to Göcke, God is infinite in the sense that He is paraconsistent and, therefore, not subject to the law of contradiction. Göcke's argument, I suggest, helps illuminate the paraconsistent underpinnings of Sri Ramakrishna's own conception of the Infinite God. At the same time, we can pinpoint certain weaknesses in Göcke's argument by examining it in the light of Sri Ramakrishna.

Section IV then triangulates Sri Ramakrishna and Göcke with the contemporary Continental philosopher Jean-Luc Marion. Marion's trenchant critique of various forms of "conceptual idolatry" and his positive account of God as *agape* resonate strongly with Sri Ramakrishna's views on divine infinity. However, Sri Ramakrishna also helps us see how both Göcke and Marion lapse into different forms of conceptual idolatry in their own right.

## 1. *Satyam jñānam anantaṁ brahma*: Sri Ramakrishna in Dialogue with Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, and Viśvanātha Cakravartin

Since a comprehensive discussion of Indian views on divine infinity is beyond the scope of this chapter, I will focus on three prominent interpretations of the word *anantaṁ* in "*satyam jñānam anantaṁ brahma*," the classic definition of Brahman in Taittirīya Upaniṣad 2.1.1. In particular, I will examine the interpretations of Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, and Viśvanātha Cakravartin and then identify points of affinity and divergence between their views and the views of Sri Ramakrishna.

Not surprisingly, Śaṅkara (c. 788–820) interprets "*satyam jñānam anantaṁ brahma*" in accordance with his Advaitic philosophy. He interprets "*brahma*" as the impersonal nondual Ātman, which is "free from all distinctions created by limiting adjuncts" (*vidbhūta-sarvopādhi-viśeṣa*).<sup>7</sup> According to Śaṅkara, Taittirīya Upaniṣad 2.1.1 is a grammatical instance of *sāmānādhikaranyam* ("correlative predication"), the rule that the words denoting the attributes (*viśeṣaṇa*-s) of an entity should be in the same case as the word denoting the entity (*viśeṣya*).<sup>8</sup> In

7. Śaṅkarācārya, *Taittirīyopaniṣad Sānuvāda Śaṅkarabhāṣyasahita* (Gorakhpur: Gita Press, 2008), 82.

8. Śaṅkarācārya, *Taittirīyopaniṣad*, 87.



this case, “*satyam jñānam anantam*” constitutes a syntactically correct definition of “*brahma*,” since the three adjectives have the same nominative case-ending as the noun “*brahma*.”

Śaṅkara is well aware, however, that if “*satyam*,” “*jñānam*,” and “*anantam*” are taken as three different attributes of Brahman, then Brahman would be differentiated rather than nondual. Hence, Śaṅkara argues that each of the three terms should be understood primarily in a negative manner. Brahman is “*satyam*” (“real”) in the sense that Brahman is not “mutable,” since all mutable things are unreal.<sup>9</sup> Brahman is “*jñānam*” in the sense that It is not an “insentient entity like earth” (*mṛdva acit*).<sup>10</sup> Does “*jñānam*” imply, then, that Brahman is a conscious “Knower” (*jñānakartṛ*) who is different from both knowledge itself and the objects of knowledge?<sup>11</sup> Śaṅkara emphatically denies this interpretation of “*jñānam*,” since it entails subject-object duality, which would undermine his Advaitic position.

According to Śaṅkara, the words “*satyam*” and “*anantam*” both rule out the possibility that Brahman is a knower.<sup>12</sup> Since any knower is changeful and Brahman is “*satyam*” in the sense of *not* being subject to change, Brahman cannot be a knower. The word “*anantam*,” Śaṅkara argues, also rules out the possibility that Brahman is a knower: “That, indeed, is infinite which is not separated from anything [*yaddhi na kutaścit pravibhajyate tad anantam*]. If it be the knower, It becomes delimited by the knowable and the knowledge, and hence there cannot be infinitude . . .”<sup>13</sup> Taking the word “*anantam*” to signify nonduality, Śaṅkara argues that Brahman therefore cannot be the knower, since the very distinction between knower and known implies subject-object duality. For Śaṅkara, then, Brahman is infinite in the sense of being impersonal nondual Consciousness.<sup>14</sup>

In his final interpretive move, Śaṅkara reiterates that Brahman is the nondual Reality “devoid of all distinctions,” so all three terms should be understood

9. Śaṅkarācārya, *Taittirīyopaniṣad*, 89. For the English translation, see Śaṅkarācārya, *Eight Upaniṣads*, vol. 1, 308–9.

10. Śaṅkarācārya, *Taittirīyopaniṣad*, 90; Śaṅkarācārya, *Eight Upaniṣads*, vol. 1, 309.

11. Śaṅkarācārya, *Taittirīyopaniṣad*, 90; Śaṅkarācārya, *Eight Upaniṣads*, vol. 1, 309.

12. Śaṅkarācārya, *Taittirīyopaniṣad*, 90; Śaṅkarācārya, *Eight Upaniṣads*, vol. 1, 309.

13. Śaṅkarācārya, *Taittirīyopaniṣad*, 90; Śaṅkarācārya, *Eight Upaniṣads*, vol. 1, 309.

14. See Śaṅkarācārya, *Taittirīyopaniṣad*, 92; Śaṅkarācārya, *Eight Upaniṣads*, vol. 1, 310–11. Shortly thereafter, Śaṅkara claims that the word *anantam* is a denial of “finitude” (“*antavatva*”). Later Advaitins specify that the word *anantam* denies the limitations of space (*deśa*), time (*kāla*), and object (*vastu*). See, for instance, Vidyāraṇya’s *Pañcadaśī* 3.35. Vidyāraṇya, *Pañcadaśī of Śrī Vidyāraṇya Swāmī*, trans. Swāmī Swāhānanda (Chennai: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 2001), 91.

apophatically as indirect pointers to the nondual Reality which is beyond speech.<sup>15</sup> Brahman, Śaṅkara argues, is “indirectly indicated” (*lakṣyate*) by the terms “*satyam*,” “*jñānam*,” and “*anantam*,” but It is not “directly expressed” (*ucyate*) by any of them.<sup>16</sup> That is, Śaṅkara ultimately claims that Taittirīya Upaniṣad’s definition of Brahman as “*satyam jñānam anantam*” is an instance of “*lakṣaṇā*” (“indirect predication”), since each of the three terms indirectly indicates the strictly ineffable *nirguṇa* Brahman.<sup>17</sup>

Rāmānuja (c. 1017–1137) agrees with Śaṅkara that “*satyam jñānam anantam brahma*” is an instance of *sāmānādhikaranyam*, but he departs radically from Śaṅkara in his understanding of the ontological implications of this grammatical rule.<sup>18</sup> Rāmānuja defines *sāmānādhikaranyam* as follows: “The referring to one and the same object by two or more words which have different grounds for their occurrence” (*bhinna-pravṛtti-nimittānām śabdānām ekasmīnnarthe vṛttis sāmānādhikaranyam*).<sup>19</sup> For Rāmānuja, the grammatical structure of a definition reflects the ontological structure of what is being defined. Since Taittirīya Upaniṣad 2.1.1 instantiates *sāmānādhikaranyam*, Rāmānuja argues that the words “*satyam*,” “*jñānam*,” and “*anantam*” must refer to *different real attributes* of Brahman itself.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, according to Rāmānuja, Brahman is not the attributeless

15. Śaṅkarācārya, *Taittirīyopaniṣad*, 97; Śaṅkarācārya, *Eight Upaniṣads*, vol. 1, 315.

16. Śaṅkarācārya, *Taittirīyopaniṣad*, 97; Śaṅkarācārya, *Eight Upaniṣads*, vol. 1, 315.

17. Scholars have debated precisely how to interpret Śaṅkara’s reading of “*satyam jñānam anantam*.” According to Julius Lipner, Śaṅkara takes the definition as an instance of “proximate *lakṣaṇā*.” Lipner, “Śaṅkara on *Satyam Jñānam Anantam Brahma*,” in *Relativism, Suffering and Beyond: Essays in Memory of Bimal K. Matilal*, ed. Purushottama Bilimoria and J. N. Mohanty (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 301–18. In contrast to Lipner, both Christopher Bartley and J. G. Suthren Hirst argue that Śaṅkara does not appeal to *lakṣaṇā* at all. See Bartley, *The Theology of Rāmānuja: Realism and Religion* (London: Routledge, 2002), 111–23, and Suthren Hirst, *Śaṅkara’s Advaita Vedānta: A Way of Teaching* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005), 145–51. Meanwhile, Madeleine Biardeau argues that there is a tension between Śaṅkara’s literal interpretation of 2.1.1 and his appeal to *lakṣaṇā*. Biardeau, “La définition dans la pensée indienne,” *Journal Asiatique* 245 (1957), 371–84. I am inclined to side with Lipner against Bartley and Suthren Hirst that Śaṅkara does appeal to some form of *lakṣaṇā*, but defending this interpretation is well beyond the scope of this chapter. For my purposes, what is most important in Śaṅkara’s interpretation of Taittirīya Upaniṣad 2.1.1 is that he interprets the three terms negatively and that he takes “*anantam*” to indicate the nondual, impersonal nature of Brahman.

18. My summary of Rāmānuja’s interpretation of “*satyam jñānam anantam*” draws heavily on Julius Lipner’s excellent account in his book, *The Face of Truth* (London: Macmillan, 1986), 29–36.

19. Rāmānuja, *Vedārthasaṅgraha*, trans. S. S. Raghavachar (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2002), 24 [paragraph 24]. See Lipner’s illuminating discussion of Rāmānuja’s definition of *sāmānādhikaranyam* in *The Face of Truth*, 29–30.

20. Rāmānuja, *Śrībhāṣyam*, vol. 1, ed. Lalitakrishna Goswami (Delhi: Chaukhamba, 2000), 107. For an English translation, see Rāmānuja, *The Vedānta-Sūtras with the Commentary by Rāmānuja: Part III*, trans. George Thibaut (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1904), 79.

(*nirviśeṣa*) nondual Reality—as Śaṅkara would have it—but in fact the personal God “endowed with various auspicious attributes” (*aneka-viśeṣaṇa-viśiṣṭa*).<sup>21</sup>

On the basis of this ontological understanding of *sāmānādhikaranyam*, Rāmānuja provides a kataphatic interpretation of the three terms in Taittirīya Upaniṣad 2.1.1 that contrasts sharply with Śaṅkara’s apophatic Advaitic interpretation. According to Rāmānuja, “*satyam*” means “unconditioned existence” (*nirupādhikasattā*), which distinguishes Brahman from both insentient entities and embodied beings.<sup>22</sup> “*Jñānam*” means “eternal and uncontracted knowledge” (*nitya-asamkucita-jñāna*), which distinguishes Brahman from liberated beings whose knowledge was previously contracted.<sup>23</sup> Finally, “*anantam*” means “not limited by space, time, or object” (*deśa-kāla-vastu-pariccheda-rahita*), which distinguishes Brahman from *nityasūris*, divine beings who were never trapped in the *saṃsāric* state and who are always in communion with God.<sup>24</sup> Rāmānuja then sums up his interpretation of Brahman’s infinitude: “Since Brahman’s essential nature possesses attributes, Brahman has infinitude with respect to both His essential nature and His attributes” (*saguṇatvāt svarūpasya svarūpeṇa guṇaiś cānantyam*).<sup>25</sup> For Śaṅkara, as we have seen, “*anantam*” implies the impersonality and nonduality of Brahman. For Rāmānuja, by contrast, Brahman is infinite in the sense of being the personal (*saguṇa*) God who is not limited by space, time, or object and who has infinitely many auspicious attributes.

The Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava philosopher Viśvanātha Cakravartin (c. 1676–1708) reconciles, to a certain extent, the positions of Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja. Following the Acintyabhedābheda school of Vedānta, Viśvanātha maintains that the Supreme Reality is the personal God Kṛṣṇa whose “peripheral effulgence” (*prabhā* or *tanubhā*) is the impersonal Brahman.<sup>26</sup> Viśvanātha’s understanding of

21. Rāmānuja, *Śrībhāṣyam*, vol. 1, 107; Rāmānuja, *The Vedānta-Sūtras*, 79.

22. Rāmānuja, *Śrībhāṣyam*, vol. 1, 233; Rāmānuja, *The Vedānta-Sūtras*, 159.

23. Rāmānuja, *Śrībhāṣyam*, vol. 1, 233; Rāmānuja, *The Vedānta-Sūtras*, 159.

24. Rāmānuja, *Śrībhāṣyam*, vol. 1, 234; Rāmānuja, *The Vedānta-Sūtras*, 160.

25. Rāmānuja, *Śrībhāṣyam*, vol. 1, 234; Rāmānuja, *The Vedānta-Sūtras*, 160.

26. Kṛṣṇaśaṅkaraśāstrī, ed., *Śrīmadbhāgavatamahāpurāṇam (Anekavyākhyāsamalākṛtam): Daśamaskandhaḥ* (Ahmedabad: Shri Bhāgavata Vidyapeetha, 1965), 1134. For an English translation, see Visvanatha Cakravarti Thakura, *Sārārtha Darśini: Tenth Canto Commentaries, Srimad Bhagavatam*, trans. Bhanu Swami (New Delhi: Mahanidhi Swami, 2004), 289. Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas view *Caitanya Caritāmṛta* 1.3 as the foundational statement on the relationship between Bhagavān Kṛṣṇa and the impersonal nondual Brahman: “*yad advaitam brahmopaniṣadi tad apyasya tanubhā*” (“That nondual Brahman in the Upaniṣads is the mere peripheral brilliance of Krishna”). Kṛṣṇadās Kavirāj, *Śrīrīcāitanyacaritāmṛta* (Gorakhpur: Gita Press, 2008), 2.

divine infinity is brought out clearly in his commentary on verses 15–16 of *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 10.28, which run as follows:

[Lord Kṛṣṇa revealed to the cowherd boys] the eternal spiritual effulgence of Brahman—Reality, Consciousness, Infinite—which the sages, shaking off the hold of the *guṇas*, experience in *samādhī*.

Kṛṣṇa led them [the cowherd boys] to the Lake of Brahman, submerged them in it, and then lifted them up and revealed to them the transcendent realm of Vaikuṇṭha, which was revealed to Akrūra earlier.

[*satyaṃ jñānam anantaṃ yad brahmajyotiḥ sanātanam*  
*yaddhi paśyanti munayo guṇāpāye samāhitāḥ*  
*te tu brahmabradāṃ nitā magnāḥ kṛṣṇena coddhṛtāḥ*  
*dadīṣur brahmaṇo lokaṃ yatrākṛūro 'dhyagāt purā.*]<sup>27</sup>

The first verse echoes Taittirīya Upaniṣad 2.1.1 in characterizing Brahman as “*satyaṃ jñānam anantaṃ*.” Viśvanātha, interpreting “*anantaṃ*” as “unlimited” (*aparicchinnaṃ*) and “*sanātanam*” as “eternally perfect,” claims that this first verse refers to the impersonal nondual Brahman realized by Advaitic “*jñānīs*.”<sup>28</sup> However, in stark contrast to Śaṅkara, Viśvanātha claims that the impersonal Brahman is nothing but the “effulgence” (*prabhā*) of the personal God Kṛṣṇa.<sup>29</sup> According to Viśvanātha, the infinity of the impersonal Brahman pales in comparison to the “incomprehensibly infinite Śakti” (*atarhya-ananta-śakti*) of Bhagavān Kṛṣṇa Himself, by means of which Kṛṣṇa first vouchsafed to the cowherd boys a realization of the impersonal Brahman—figured as the “Lake of Brahman” (*brahmabradā*)—and then revealed to them His own infinitely greater Supreme Personality in the spiritual realm of Gokula.<sup>30</sup> As Viśvanātha puts it, “the bliss of Kṛṣṇa’s love in Gokula far exceeds the paltry loveless happiness in Brahman” (*premarahitād brahmasukha-anubhavāt premasahito vaikunṭhasukha-anubhavaḥ śreṣṭhaḥ*).<sup>31</sup> For Viśvanātha, then, the infinite impersonal Brahman is only a minor—and rather bland—aspect of the Infinite

27. For both the Sanskrit original and the English translation, see *Srimad Bhagavatā: The Holy Book of God*, vol. 3, trans. Swami Tapasyananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 2004), 155.

28. Kṛṣṇaśaṅkaraśāstrī, ed., *Śrīmadbhāgavatamahāpurāṇam: Daśamaskandhaḥ*, 1143; Cakravarti Thakura, *Sārārtha Darśini: Tenth Canto Commentaries*, 290.

29. Kṛṣṇaśaṅkaraśāstrī, ed., *Śrīmadbhāgavatamahāpurāṇam: Daśamaskandhaḥ*, 1134; Cakravarti Thakura, *Sārārtha Darśini: Tenth Canto Commentaries*, 289.

30. Kṛṣṇaśaṅkaraśāstrī, ed., *Śrīmadbhāgavatamahāpurāṇam: Daśamaskandhaḥ*, 1143; Cakravarti Thakura, *Sārārtha Darśini: Tenth Canto Commentaries*, 290.

31. Kṛṣṇaśaṅkaraśāstrī, ed., *Śrīmadbhāgavatamahāpurāṇam: Daśamaskandhaḥ*, 1143; Cakravarti Thakura, *Sārārtha Darśini: Tenth Canto Commentaries*, 290.

Personality of Kṛṣṇa. Viśvanātha, in effect, reconciles Śaṅkara's impersonalism and Rāmānuja's personalism by maintaining that the Supreme Person Kṛṣṇa, by means of His unthinkably infinite Śakti, reveals His peripheral impersonal effulgence to Advaitic *jñānīs*.

Viśvanātha's commentary on *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 1.2.11 sheds further light on his understanding of divine infinitude. The verse 1.2.11 runs as follows:

That which the knowers of Reality say is Reality is Non-dual Knowledge.

It is called Brahman, Paramātmā, and Bhagavān.

[*vadanti tat tattvavidas tattvaṃ yajjñānam advayam.*

*brahmeti paramātmēti bhagavān iti śabdyate.*]<sup>32</sup>

In his commentary on this verse, Viśvanātha claims that the nondual Kṛṣṇa is experienced in different ways—and called by different names—by spiritual aspirants of varying calibers.<sup>33</sup> Strikingly, Viśvanātha reverses Śaṅkara's scheme by claiming that Advaitic *jñānīs* belong to the lowest order of “qualified aspirants” (*adbhikāriṇi*), since they experience the Divine Reality—which they call “Brahman”—as “formless and devoid of the distinction between knower, the known, etc.” and only as “consciousness in general” (*nirākāraṃ jñātr-jñeyādi-vibhāga-śūnyaṃ cit sāmānyam*).<sup>34</sup> *Yogīs*, according to Viśvanātha, are superior to Advaitic *jñānīs*, because *yogīs* experience two or three “qualities” (*dharma*-s) of the Divine Reality—which they call “Paramātmā”—such as the quality of being the “Inner Controller” (*antaryāmi*) of all beings.<sup>35</sup>

According to Viśvanātha, *bhaktas* belong to the highest rung of spiritual aspirants, since they enjoy the fullest and richest knowledge of the Divine Reality, whom they call “Bhagavān.” As Viśvanātha puts it, *bhaktas* alone have the “capacity to grasp that Bhagavān is the One who has unlimited qualities like form, beauty, and playfulness, and an essence [*svarūpa*] that is incomprehensibly infinite and composed of consciousness and bliss” (*acintya-ananta-cid-ānandamaya-svarūpa-rūpa-guṇa-līlādy-anekadharmavat tvasya grahaṇa-yogyatāyām*).<sup>36</sup> From Viśvanātha's

32. *Srimad Bhagavata: The Holy Book of God*, vol. 1, trans. Swami Tapasyananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 2003), 7.

33. The translations of passages from Viśvanātha's commentary on *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 1.2.11 are my own, though I have consulted Jonathan Edelmann's unpublished translation, “*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 1.2.11 with Commentaries.”

34. Kṛṣṇaśaṅkaraśāstrī, ed., *Śrīmadbhāgavatamahāpurāṇam (Anekavyākhyāsamalaṅkṛtam): Prathamah Skandbah* (Ahmedabad: Shri Bhāgavata Vidyapeetha, 1965), 133.

35. Kṛṣṇaśaṅkaraśāstrī, ed., *Śrīmadbhāgavatamahāpurāṇam: Prathamah Skandbah*, 133–34.

36. Kṛṣṇaśaṅkaraśāstrī, ed., *Śrīmadbhāgavatamahāpurāṇam: Prathamah Skandbah*, 134.

standpoint, since God is “incomprehensibly infinite” (*acintya-ananta*), He can be experienced in different ways by spiritual aspirants of varying calibers. Indeed, Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava philosophers maintain that the Lord, by virtue of His *acintya-śakti*, is capable even of resolving what appear to be contradictions to the finite human intellect. Accordingly, Baladeva Vidyābhūṣaṇa defines *acintya-śakti* as the “resolver of contradictions” (*virodha-bhañjikā*).<sup>37</sup> For Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas, while personal and impersonal conceptions of God seem to contradict each other, God is capable of being *both* personal (*saguṇa*) and impersonal (*nirguṇa*), even though the human intellect is unable to grasp how this is possible.<sup>38</sup> It is clear, however, that Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas do not grant equal ontological status to the personal and impersonal aspects of the Supreme Reality: since the impersonal Brahman is the mere peripheral effulgence of the personal God Kṛṣṇa, *bhaktas* of Kṛṣṇa are far superior to Advaitic *jñānīs*.<sup>39</sup>

We are now in a position to consider Sri Ramakrishna’s views on divine infinity and compare them with those of Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, and Viśvanātha. Sri Ramakrishna would often refer to God as “infinite” (*ananta*). He asks, for instance, “Who can fully know the Infinite Lord [*ananta īśvar*]?” (*K* 101 / *G* 150). On another occasion, he asks, “Who can describe the Infinite [*ananta*]?” (*K* 181 / *G* 218). He also frequently mentions God’s “infinite power” (*ananta-śakti*) (*K* 100 / *G* 149), His “infinite glories” (*ananta aiśvarya*) (*K* 104 / *G* 152), and His “infinite sportive play” (*ananta līlā*) (*K* 228 / *G* 257). In my discussion of VV3 in section III of the previous chapter, I began to show how Sri Ramakrishna’s standpoint of *vijñāna* holds the key to appreciating what is most radical and original in his conception of divine infinity. As a *vijñānī*, Sri Ramakrishna maintains that God is infinite in the sense that His inexhaustible plenitude exceeds the grasp of the finite human intellect.

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37. Baladeva Vidyābhūṣaṇa, *Prameyaratnāvalī* (Vrindavan: Agrawal Press, 1941), 19.

38. As O. B. L. Kapoor puts it, the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava doctrine of *acintyatā* implies that God “transcends even the law of contradiction” and, hence, is both “*saviśeṣa* [with attributes] and *nirviśeṣa* [without attributes].” Kapoor, *The Philosophy and Religion of Śrī Caitanya* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 2008), 85–87. For a similar interpretation of *acintyatā*, see Surendranath Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, vol. 4 (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, [1922] 2000), 18. Jonathan Edelmann also made a similar point in correspondence.

39. In fact, Swami Tapasyananda convincingly argues that the hierarchical interpretation of *Bhāgavata* 1.2.11 endorsed by Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas is eisegetic, since neither 1.2.11 nor any other verse in the *Bhāgavata* suggests a “hierarchical order of Bhagavan, Paramatman and Brahman.” *Srimad Bhagavata: The Holy Book of God*, vol. 4, trans. Swami Tapasyananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 2003), 232–33. Arguably, then, Sri Ramakrishna’s nonhierarchical teaching that the same Infinite Reality is called “Brahman,” “Ātman,” and “Bhagavān” by different types of spiritual aspirants—which I discuss later in the section—better captures the purport of *Bhāgavata* 1.2.11 than Viśvanātha’s hierarchical interpretation.



For Sri Ramakrishna, God's infinitude has both epistemological and ontological dimensions. One of his favorite teachings succinctly captures the epistemological dimension of God's infinitude: "No one can place a limit to God by saying, 'God is this, and no more' [*tāhār iti karā jāi na*]" (K 152 / G 192). The particle *iti*, in both Bengali and Sanskrit, functions as a quotation mark denoting the end of a statement or idea. According to Sri Ramakrishna, we should not try to put an *iti* to God by limiting the Infinite Reality to what our paltry intellects can grasp of Him. As he puts it, "It is not good to say that what we ourselves think of God is the only truth and what others think is false; that because we think of God as formless [*nirākār*], therefore He is formless and cannot have form; that because we think of God as having form [*sākār*], therefore He has form and cannot be formless. Can anyone place a limit to God's nature? [*mānuṣ ki tār iti korte pāre?*]" (K 422 / G 422–23).<sup>40</sup> The finite human intellect tends to think in terms of an either-or paradigm: *either* God has form *or* God lacks form, *either* God is personal *or* God is impersonal, *either* God is immanent *or* God is transcendent. Sri Ramakrishna insists, however, that it would be a mistake to confine God's nature to what we can grasp of Him.

As a mystic, Sri Ramakrishna breaks outside the confines of the finite intellect by ascending to the level of suprarational spiritual experience. From the standpoint of *viññāna*, he maintains that God's infinite nature is best understood in terms of a both-and paradigm rather than an either-or paradigm. As he puts it, "That Reality which is the *nitya* is also the *līlā*. . . . [E]verything is possible for God. He is formless, and again He assumes forms. He is the individual and He is the universe. He is Brahman, and He is Śakti. There is no limit—no end—to God [*tāhār iti nāi,—śeṣ nāi*]. Nothing is impossible for Him" (K 997 / G 920). Sri Ramakrishna's gloss of the word *iti* as *śeṣ* ("end") reflects the ontological dimension of God's infinitude: God has no *iti* in the sense that God's nature has no limit or end. Hence, the Infinite Divine Reality is *both* personal and impersonal, *both* with and without form, *both* immanent and transcendent. By exploiting both the objective and subjective connotations of the word *iti*, Sri Ramakrishna conveys the inseparability of the ontological and epistemological dimensions of

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40. Adrian Moore distinguishes two major strands in the history of Western thinking on infinitude. Mathematical conceptions of the infinite emphasize "boundlessness; endlessness; unlimitedness; immeasurability; eternity; that which is such that, given any determinate part of it, there is always more to come; that which is greater than any assignable quantity." Moore, *The Infinite*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2001), 1. Metaphysical conceptions of the infinite, by contrast, emphasize "completeness; wholeness; unity; universality; absoluteness; perfection; self-sufficiency; autonomy" (Moore, *The Infinite*, 1–2). Sri Ramakrishna's conception of divine infinitude, I suggest, combines both mathematical and metaphysical strands: God's illimitability, for Sri Ramakrishna, attests to—and is inseparable from—His perfection, freedom, and incomprehensibility.

God's infinity: since the limits of human thought do not dictate the limits of divine possibility, God can have numerous aspects, attributes, forms, and powers that may appear contradictory to the finite intellect.

Sri Ramakrishna's understanding of divine infinity brings him closer to Viśvanātha than to Śaṅkara or Rāmānuja. Sri Ramakrishna's teaching that "nothing is impossible" for God accords well with Viśvanātha's Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava doctrine of *acintya-śakti*, God's incomprehensible capacity to assume multiple forms and aspects that seem contradictory to the rational intellect. Sri Ramakrishna also follows Viśvanātha in striving to harmonize personalist and impersonalist conceptions of the Supreme Reality. Following Śaṅkara, Sri Ramakrishna refers to the Supreme Reality realized in *nirvikalpa samādhi* as "The Infinite, the formless and impersonal Brahman beyond speech and thought" (*ananta, vākya-maner atīt, arūp nirākār brahma*) (K 181 / G 218). Following Rāmānuja, Sri Ramakrishna refers to the "Infinite Lord" (*ananta īśvar*) (K 101 / G 150) and His "infinite power" (*ananta-śakti*) (K 100 / G 149) and "infinite glories" (*ananta aiśvarya*) (K 104 / G 152). Sri Ramakrishna reconciles Śaṅkara's impersonalism and Rāmānuja's personalism by adopting a broad view of God's infinity rooted in the spiritual experience of *vijñāna*. As a *vijñānī*, Sri Ramakrishna realized that one and the same Infinite God reveals His impersonal aspect to *jñānīs* and His personal aspect to *bhaktas*. For Sri Ramakrishna, then, God is infinite not only in His utterly ineffable transcendence but also in His capacity to *manifest* in infinite ways—for instance, as various forms of the personal God, as incarnations, and as the entire universe. As Sri Ramakrishna puts it, the Infinite Saccidānanda "assumes forms for the sake of His *bhaktas*" (K 181 / G 217). Indeed, he emphasizes that the divine forms worshipped by *bhaktas* are real manifestations of the Infinite Divine Consciousness: "*Bhaktas* acquire a 'love-body' [*bhāgavatī-tanu*], and with its help they see the Spirit-form [*cinmay rūp*] of the Supreme Reality" (K 181 / G 217). For both Sri Ramakrishna and Viśvanātha, then, the unthinkable infinite God appears to Advaitic *jñānīs* as the impersonal Absolute and to *bhaktas* as the personal God.

However, Sri Ramakrishna differs from Viśvanātha at the level of ontology. While Viśvanātha subordinates the impersonal Brahman to the Supreme Person Kṛṣṇa, Sri Ramakrishna grants *equal* ontological status to the impersonal and personal aspects of the Infinite Reality.<sup>41</sup> This crucial philosophical

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41. An important precedent for Sri Ramakrishna's position is the philosophy of Tantra, which also grants equal ontological status to both the impersonal Absolute (Śiva) and the dynamic Śakti. Indeed, as I pointed out in Chapter 1, Sri Ramakrishna's ontological doctrine of the inseparability of Brahman and Śakti may derive, in part, from Tāntrika philosophy. There are striking affinities between Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy and the Tāntrika philosophy of Kāśmīrī Śaivism in particular. The central Kāśmīrī Śaiva doctrine of *svātantrya* ("divine freedom") could be seen as an early precursor to the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava doctrine of *acintya-śakti*. B. N. Pandit, a prominent scholar of Kāśmīrī Śaivism, defines *svātantrya* as Paramaśiva's



difference between Sri Ramakrishna and Viśvanātha is made clear in one of Sri Ramakrishna's favorite teachings, which bears a striking resemblance to *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 1.2.11: "The Divine Reality who is called Brahman by the *jñānīs* is known as Ātman by the *yogīs* and as Bhagavān by the *bhaktas*" (K 83 / G 133). Since Sri Ramakrishna was quite familiar with the *Bhāgavata*, this teaching may very well have been inspired by *Bhāgavata* 1.2.11. Significantly, he clarifies this teaching from the standpoint of *vijñāna*: while Advaitic *jñānīs* dismiss the universe as unreal and insist that God cannot be "a Person" (*vyakti*), *bhaktas* "accept the waking state as real" and see the universe as a real manifestation of "God's glory" (K 83 / G 133). He adds that the greatest type of devotee, the "*uttam bhakta*," sees that "God Himself has become the twenty-four cosmic principles—both the individual souls and the universe" (K 83 / G 133). As I pointed out in the previous chapter, this *uttam bhakta* is none other than the *vijñānī*, who realizes that the Infinite Reality is not only the impersonal Brahman but also the personal Śakti pervading the entire universe. As Sri Ramakrishna puts it, "When God is actionless [*niṣkriyā*], I call God 'Brahman'; when God creates, preserves, and destroys, I call God 'Śakti'" (K 861 / G 802).

Viśvanātha, we should recall, espouses the hierarchical view that *bhaktas* are superior to both *jñānīs* and *yogīs*, since *bhaktas* alone realize the personal Bhagavān in His infinite fullness, while *jñānīs* and *yogīs* realize Brahman and Paramātmān respectively, which are only minor aspects of Bhagavān. By contrast, Sri Ramakrishna maintains that the impersonal Brahman-Ātman and the personal Śakti are complementary aspects of one and the same Infinite Reality. Accordingly, Sri Ramakrishna holds that *jñānīs*, *yogīs*, and *bhaktas* all realize one and the same Infinite Reality in different forms and aspects, none of which can be said to be superior to any of the others. At the same time, he distinguishes two classes of *bhaktas*. Ordinary *bhaktas*, according to Sri Ramakrishna, realize the personal God. By contrast, *vijñānī bhaktas* (or *uttam bhaktas*), after having realized *both* the personal and impersonal aspects of the Infinite Reality, see that God—in His Śakti aspect—has become the entire universe. Therefore, while Sri Ramakrishna places ordinary *bhaktas* on the same footing as *jñānīs* and *yogīs*,

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"capacity to do that which seems impossible" ("*aghaṭanīya-ghaṭana-sāmarthyam*"). *The Mirror of Self-Supremacy or Svātantrya-Darpaṇa* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1993), 50. One could argue, from the perspective of Kāśmīrī Śaivism, that Paramaśiva's *svātantrya* enables Him to be personal and impersonal at the same time. However, I do not focus on Kāśmīrī Śaivism in this chapter, since Kāśmīrī Śaivites, as far as I am aware, do not theorize divine infinity in terms of the doctrine of *svātantrya*. The Kāśmīrī Śaivite Abhinavagupta, for instance, claims that the Divine Reality is "replete with infinite śaktis" (*ananta-śakti-paripūrṇam*), but he does not connect divine infinity to *svātantrya*. Abhinavagupta, *An Introduction to Tantric Philosophy: The Paramārthasāra of Abhinavagupta with the Commentary of Yogarāja*, trans. Lyne Bansat-Boudon and Kamaleshadatta Tripathi (London: Routledge, 2011), 363.

he maintains that *viññānīs* have a broader and deeper knowledge of the Infinite Reality than *jñānīs*, *yogīs*, and ordinary *bhaktas* do.

Interestingly, then, while both Sri Ramakrishna and Viśvanātha adopt a hierarchical view that privileges a certain class of *bhaktas* over other types of spiritual aspirants, they part ways in their understanding of what these highest *bhaktas* realize. For Viśvanātha, the highest *bhakta* realizes the ultimately personal God Kṛṣṇa, whose minor aspect is the impersonal Brahman. For Sri Ramakrishna, by contrast, the highest *viññānī bhakta* realizes God as the Infinite Reality which is *equally* personal and impersonal but which is also *beyond* both personality and impersonality. On the basis of *viññāna*, then, Sri Ramakrishna is able to harmonize Śaṅkara's impersonalism and Rāmānuja's personalism in a less hierarchical manner than Viśvanātha.

## II. Scotus and Cusa: Two Medieval Christian Paradigms for Understanding Divine Infinity

Now that we have situated Sri Ramakrishna's views on divine infinity within the Indian philosophical context, we can bring him into dialogue with some important Christian philosophers and theologians. While Christian theologians have interpreted divine infinity in numerous ways, this section focuses on the medieval theologians Scotus (1266–1308) and Cusa (1401–1464), whose views are especially relevant to the cross-cultural philosophical issues I am exploring in this chapter.<sup>42</sup> According to Scotus, God is “intensively infinite” in the sense that He has all perfections—such as goodness, power, and knowledge—to an infinite degree.<sup>43</sup> In particular, God has “infinite being,” from which Scotus derives all the other infinite perfections of God. As Scotus puts it, “As ‘being’ virtually includes the ‘good’ and the ‘true,’ so ‘infinite being’ includes the ‘infinitely good,’ ‘the infinitely true,’ and all pure perfections under the aspect of infinity.”<sup>44</sup> Richard Cross spells out an important consequence of Scotus's view of divine infinity: “The difference between God and creatures, at least with regard to God's possession of

42. For a more comprehensive survey of medieval Christian views on divine infinity, see Leo Sweeney, *Divine Infinity in Greek and Medieval Thought* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992).

43. See Antonie Vos, *The Philosophy of John Duns Scotus* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 257; Richard Cross, *Duns Scotus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 41; R. T. Mullins, “The Difficulty with Demarcating Pantheism,” *Sophia* 55 (2016), 330–31. As Anne Davenport points out, the notion of intensive infinity can be traced to Saint Augustine's concept of *quantitas virtutis sive perfectionis* (“quantity of perfection”). *Measure of a Different Greatness: The Intensive Infinite, 1250–1650* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), xi.

44. John Duns Scotus, *Philosophical Writings: A Selection*, trans. Allan Wolter (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 27. For the original Latin, see Scotus, *Ordinatio* 1, d. 3, pars 1, qq. 1–2, n. 58.

the pure perfections, is ultimately one of degree. Specifically, the perfections exist in an infinite degree in God, and in a finite degree in creatures.<sup>45</sup> For Scotus, then, while human beings may be good, knowledgeable, and powerful to a finite degree, only God is *infinitely* good, *infinitely* knowledgeable, *infinitely* powerful, and so on.<sup>46</sup>

Many recent analytic philosophers of religion adopt a broadly Scotistic approach to divine infinity. Swinburne claims, for instance, that God is infinite in the sense that He possesses divine attributes to an “infinite degree.”<sup>47</sup> Jerome Gellman interprets the claim that “God is infinite” as shorthand for the thesis that “God is omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good, and eternal”—indicating that he follows Swinburne in maintaining that God has power, knowledge, goodness, and other divine attributes to an infinite degree.<sup>48</sup> Likewise, Eric Steinhart proposes a “mathematical model of divine infinity,” which shows how “for any divine perfection P, the degree to which God has P is absolutely infinite.”<sup>49</sup> Numerous other contemporary philosophers have made similar claims about the nature of divine infinity.<sup>50</sup>

Contemporary analytic philosophers, I suggest, would do well to consider the views of Cusa, a medieval Christian theologian who adopted a far more radical approach to divine infinity than Scotus. Cusa claimed that during a sea voyage in late 1437, he had mystical experiences which led him to adopt an attitude of “learned ignorance” (*docta ignorantia*), the humble recognition that finite human reason can never understand the Infinite God.<sup>51</sup> From this epistemic

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45. Cross, *Duns Scotus*, 39.

46. I am not claiming that Scotus was the first Christian theologian to have such an understanding of divine infinity. As Graham Oppy points out, Philo’s statements about God seem to imply a similar view. Oppy, *Describing Gods: An Investigation into Divine Attributes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 34. Nonetheless, Scotus provided an especially clear and detailed elaboration of this conception of divine infinity.

47. Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 150–51. He also makes the same claim on p. 111 of the same book.

48. Jerome Gellman, “Experiencing God’s Infinity,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 31.1 (January 1994), 53.

49. Eric Steinhart, “A Mathematical Model of Divine Infinity,” *Theology and Science* 7.3 (2009), 261.

50. See, for instance, Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 54–55; Brian Leftow, “Concepts of God,” in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Craig (New York: Routledge, 1998), 93–102; Oppy, *Describing Gods*, 49–54.

51. Nicholas of Cusa, *On Learned Ignorance: A Translation and an Appraisal of De Docta Ignorantia*, 2nd ed., ed. and trans. Jasper Hopkins (Minneapolis: A.J. Banning Press, 1985), 158. For discussions of Cusa’s mystical experiences, see Moran, “Nicholas of Cusa and Modern Philosophy,” 184 and Hillary Webb, “Coincidentia Oppositorum,” in *Encyclopedia of Psychology and Religion*, ed. David A. Leeming (Boston: Springer, 2014), 158.

standpoint of learned ignorance, Cusa boldly declares that the Infinite God is “that Simplicity wherein contradictories coincide [*ubi contradictoria coincidunt*].”<sup>52</sup> God is “infinite” in the sense that He possesses various attributes—such as form and formlessness, being and nonbeing—that appear contradictory to the human intellect.<sup>53</sup> As Cusa puts it, “reason cannot leap beyond contradictories.”<sup>54</sup> In *De Pace Fidei* (1453), Cusa calls for religious harmony on the basis of his doctrine of God as the *coincidentia oppositorum*.<sup>55</sup> According to Cusa, different religious communities—he specifically has in mind followers of different Christian sects and Muslims—worship one and the same infinite personal God through “different rites” and call Him by “different names.”<sup>56</sup>

If recent analytic philosophers have tended to adopt a Scotistic approach to divine infinity, Sri Ramakrishna can be seen as embedding the Scotistic approach within a more radical Cusaeen paradigm. Sri Ramakrishna clearly agrees with Scotus that God possesses divine attributes to an infinite degree. Sri Ramakrishna claims, for instance, that God has “infinite power” (*ananta-śakti*) (*K* 100 / *G* 149) and “infinite glories” (*ananta aiśvarya*) (*K* 104 / *G* 152). For Sri Ramakrishna, however, Scotus’s doctrine of intensive infinity by no means exhausts the nature of divine infinity. In fact, Sri Ramakrishna’s overall views on God’s infinity bring him much closer to Cusa than to Scotus.

Just as Cusa champions a “learned ignorance,” Sri Ramakrishna—as we saw in the previous chapter—enthusiastically endorses William Hamilton’s statement that “a learned ignorance is the end of philosophy and the beginning of religion” (*K* 255 / *G* 278). Echoing Cusa’s thesis that “reason cannot leap beyond contradictories,” Sri Ramakrishna repeatedly emphasizes that we can never understand the nature of the Infinite God with “our little intellect” (*K* 934 / *G* 864). Sri Ramakrishna also shares Cusa’s mystical bent: their respective conceptions of divine infinity are based not on intellectual speculation but on their own suprarational mystical experiences. Finally, since Sri Ramakrishna maintains that God has apparently contradictory attributes and aspects—such as personality and impersonality, and form and formlessness—I think he would have embraced

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52. Nicholas of Cusa, *On Learned Ignorance*, 7.

53. Nicholas of Cusa, *On Learned Ignorance*, 9–10.

54. Nicholas of Cusa, *On Learned Ignorance*, 40–41. See also the helpful discussions in Andrew Weeks, *German Mysticism from Hildegard of Bingen to Ludwig Wittgenstein* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), 99–116, and Moran, “Nicholas of Cusa and Modern Philosophy,” 184–85.

55. As Hopkins points out, Cusa never uses the exact phrase *coincidentia oppositorum*, but he does imply the idea at numerous places in his work (Nicholas of Cusa, *On Learned Ignorance*, 7).

56. Nicholas of Cusa, *De Pace Fidei and Cribratio Alkorani: Translation and Analysis*, 2nd ed., trans. Jasper Hopkins (Minneapolis: A.J. Banning Press, 1994), 635.

Cusa's thesis that God's unfathomable and paradoxical nature is a *coincidentia oppositorum*.

However, from Sri Ramakrishna's standpoint, Cusa's understanding of divine infinitude is insufficiently radical, since Cusa fails to subject divine personality itself to the inexorable logic of the *coincidentia oppositorum*. For Cusa, God is always and only the loving personal God who is "the giver of life and existence."<sup>57</sup> Cusa's personal God corresponds to what Sri Ramakrishna calls "Śakti" or *īśvara*, the loving and omnipotent Lord who creates and preserves the universe. For Sri Ramakrishna, however, the Infinite God is equally the impersonal nondual Reality which he calls "Brahman." His unique mystical experience of *vijñāna* enabled him, in effect, to push the doctrine of God as the *coincidentia oppositorum* much further than Cusa himself had envisioned. From Sri Ramakrishna's perspective, if God is truly the *coincidentia oppositorum*, then God can be *both* the dynamic personal Śakti *and* the transcendent impersonal Brahman—even if the finite human intellect cannot grasp how this is possible.

Since Sri Ramakrishna's conception of God as the *coincidentia oppositorum* is, in certain respects, more thoroughgoing than Cusa's, Sri Ramakrishna's vision of religious harmony also proves to be more inclusive and robust than Cusa's. As I will show at length in the next chapter, Sri Ramakrishna harmonizes theistic *and* nontheistic religious paths on the basis of his *vijñāna*-based ontology of God as the impersonal-personal Infinite Reality. According to Sri Ramakrishna, while Christianity, Islam, and theistic schools of Hinduism capture the personal aspect of the Infinite Reality, nontheistic spiritual philosophies such as Advaita Vedānta and Buddhism capture the impersonal aspect of the same Infinite Reality. In stark contrast to Sri Ramakrishna, Cusa only envisions a harmony of *theistic* religious faiths, since he never admits the possibility that God could be more, or other, than personal. Indeed, Cusa's position is actually more inclusivist than pluralist, since he claims that "there is one religion and worship, which is presupposed in all the diversity of rites."<sup>58</sup> For Cusa, this "one religion" is an ideal form of Christianity which the various mundane religions approximate to varying degrees.<sup>59</sup> Sri Ramakrishna, by contrast, was a full-blown religious pluralist who did not privilege his own Hindu religion over non-Hindu religions.

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57. Nicholas of Cusa, *De Pace Fidei*, 635 (translation slightly modified).

58. Nicholas of Cusa, *De Pace Fidei*, 640. Scott Aikin and Jason Aleksander argue that Cusa was a "meta-exclusivist." See their article "Nicholas of Cusa's *De Pace Fidei* and the Meta-exclusivism of Religious Pluralism," *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 74.2 (2013), 219–35. While I agree with Aikin and Aleksander that Cusa was not a religious pluralist, I think Cusa's position is better understood as a religious inclusivism rather than as a meta-exclusivism.

59. Cusa, *De Pace Fidei*, 636.

In spite of its limitations, Cusa's radical approach to divine infinity—which bears striking affinities with Sri Ramakrishna's approach—provides a valuable corrective to the ontologically tamer Scotistic paradigm favored by many contemporary analytic philosophers. The next section brings Sri Ramakrishna into conversation with Göcke, who challenges the mainstream analytic understanding of divine infinity by developing Cusa's doctrine of the *coincidentia oppositorum*.

### III. The Paraconsistent God: Sri Ramakrishna and Benedikt Paul Göcke

In “The Paraconsistent God” (2016), Göcke defends a radical paraconsistent conception of God's infinity.<sup>60</sup> According to Göcke, the most fundamental difference between a finite and an infinite entity is that the former but not the latter is subject to the law of contradiction. As Göcke puts it, “an entity  $x$  is qualitatively finite . . . if and only if for every property  $F$ , either  $x$  exemplifies this property, or not.”<sup>61</sup> By contrast, an entity is qualitatively infinite “if and only if there is at least one property  $F$  such that it is both  $F$  and not  $F$ .”<sup>62</sup> Göcke adds that an entity is *maximally* qualitatively infinite if “for all properties  $F$ , it is both  $F$  and not  $F$ .”<sup>63</sup>

Göcke claims that the Infinite God is a “paraconsistent entity” that is not subject to the law of contradiction.<sup>64</sup> Further, he makes the even stronger claim that God is not only qualitatively infinite but maximally qualitatively infinite. He provides both a historical and a philosophical argument in favor of his conception of God as a maximally infinite entity.<sup>65</sup> Historically, he claims that numerous Christian theologians—including Pseudo-Dionysius, Thomas Aquinas, and Nicholas of Cusa—held that God is a maximally infinite entity.<sup>66</sup> Philosophically, he argues that the widely held theistic definition of God as the “ultimate ground

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60. Benedikt Paul Göcke, “The Paraconsistent God,” in *Rethinking the Concept of a Personal God*, ed. Thomas Schärfl, Christian Tapp, and Veronika Wegener (Münster: Aschendorff, 2016), 177–99. Although I focus on this article, I also sometimes refer to Göcke's related article, “Eine Analyse der Unendlichkeit Gottes,” *Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie* 62 (2015), 142–60.

61. Göcke, “The Paraconsistent God,” 177.

62. Göcke, “The Paraconsistent God,” 180. It should be noted that Göcke considers “negatively infinite entities” as well, but I consider in this section only positively infinite entities.

63. Göcke, “The Paraconsistent God,” 180.

64. Göcke, “The Paraconsistent God,” 177.

65. For the sake of brevity, I will sometimes use the phrase “maximally infinite” as an abbreviation for “maximally qualitatively infinite.”

66. Göcke, “The Paraconsistent God,” 189–93. See also Göcke, “Eine Analyse der Unendlichkeit Gottes,” 153–55.



of empirical reality” logically entails that God is a maximally infinite entity.<sup>67</sup> Göcke’s reasoning, in brief, is as follows: since all empirical entities are finite, they either have or do not have a particular property, so the ontological ground of the possibility of all finite empirical entities must be a maximally infinite entity that has every property *and* its denial. God, in other words, must *not* be subject to the law of contradiction, since He is the ultimate ground of all entities which *are* subject to the law of contradiction.

On the basis of these arguments, Göcke provocatively claims that the “vast majority”<sup>68</sup> of analytic philosophers of religion take God to be a finite entity, since they assume that “the principle of contradiction is a fundamental logical and ontological truth concerning the very nature of each and every entity whatsoever.”<sup>69</sup> That is, even though philosophers such as Swinburne and Leftow explicitly affirm that God is infinite, they nonetheless analyze God’s nature in accordance with the law of contradiction, thereby implicitly turning God into a *finite* entity.<sup>70</sup> Göcke also helps isolate a key ontological difference between the Scotistic and Cusaeian approaches to divine infinity discussed in the previous section. In contrast to the Cusaeian approach, the Scotistic approach—favored by many analytic philosophers—tacitly presupposes that God is subject to the law of contradiction.

Göcke, I suggest, can be brought into fruitful dialogue with Sri Ramakrishna. According to Sri Ramakrishna, the Infinite God cannot be confined within the narrow bounds of the finite human intellect, which tends to think in terms of mutually exclusive alternatives: God is *either* personal *or* impersonal, *either* with *or* without form, *either* immanent *or* transcendent. Göcke’s argument helps bring out Sri Ramakrishna’s underlying presupposition that the Infinite God is not subject to the law of contradiction. Although Sri Ramakrishna never explicitly articulates this presupposition, he strongly implies it in many of his teachings. In my discussion of VV2 in the previous chapter, I cited a passage in which Sri Ramakrishna affirms the impossibility of understanding “with our small intellect” that God is at once a “finite human being” (*svarāt*) and the “all-pervading Soul of the universe” (*virāt*), at once the *nitya* and the *līlā* (K 933–34 / G 864).

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67. Göcke, “The Paraconsistent God,” 197–98. See also Göcke, “Eine Analyse der Unendlichkeit Gottes,” 155–59.

68. Göcke, “The Paraconsistent God,” 189.

69. Göcke, “The Paraconsistent God,” 187.

70. Of course, many philosophers would insist that *no* entity—including God—can be exempt from the law of contradiction. However, as Graham Priest has shown, this is a highly controversial assumption that requires justification. In fact, Priest points out that there are virtually no good arguments in favor of the universal validity of the law of contradiction. See Priest, *Beyond the Limits of Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

He then asks, “Can we ever understand all these ideas with our little intellect? Can a one-seer pot hold four seers of milk?” (K 934 / G 864). Göcke’s standpoint sheds light on Sri Ramakrishna’s teaching: one basic sense in which the finite intellect is like a “one-seer pot” is that it is bound to the law of contradiction. The Infinite God, by contrast, is like “ten seers of milk” precisely because God is *not* subject to the law of contradiction. According to Sri Ramakrishna, “everything is possible for God” (K 997 / G 920), so God can even possess aspects and attributes that appear contradictory to the rational intellect. For Sri Ramakrishna as for Göcke, God is a paraconsistent entity whose infinite nature is best understood in terms of a both-and paradigm rather than an either-or paradigm.

If Göcke helps clarify the paraconsistent underpinnings of Sri Ramakrishna’s views on God, Sri Ramakrishna’s *vijñāna*-based conception of divine infinity sets into relief four major weaknesses in Göcke’s argument. First, Göcke’s conception of God as a *maximally* infinite entity has bizarre consequences that undermine its plausibility. According to Göcke, a maximally infinite entity is “such that, for every property *F*, it is *both true and false* that it is *F*.”<sup>71</sup> The theological strangeness of this conception is brought out by a footnote in which he points out that “if the predicate ‘being evil’ refers to a possible determination of an entity . . . then my account entails that God is both evil and not evil.”<sup>72</sup> Does Göcke’s evil-and-not-evil God correspond to the God of any of the major world religions? It seems not. Indeed, Göcke’s maximally infinite God hardly seems worthy of worship.<sup>73</sup> Göcke would likely respond that since God is paraconsistent, it is not surprising that we, with our finite intellects, find the notion of an evil-and-not-evil God incoherent or unappealing. Nonetheless, the sheer strangeness of his account of the paraconsistent God makes it an unattractive alternative to traditional theism.

Interestingly, Göcke himself briefly considers a different paraconsistent conception of God that is arguably much more plausible than his own conception of a maximally qualitatively infinite God. According to Göcke, an entity is qualitatively, but not maximally, infinite “if and only if there is at least one property *F* such that it is both *F* and not *F*.”<sup>74</sup> From a Ramakrishnan perspective,

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71. Göcke, “The Paraconsistent God,” 197.

72. Göcke, “The Paraconsistent God,” 197 fn. 47.

73. In a different article, Göcke himself insists that “[a]ny concept of God has to be a concept of that which is worthy of worship” and that the “single ultimate ground of reality is worthy of worship if and only if it is absolutely holy.” Benedikt Paul Göcke, “Concepts of God and Models of the God-World Relation,” *Philosophy Compass* 12.2 (February 2017), 2. I would argue that Göcke violates his own criterion by claiming that God is both evil and not evil.

74. Göcke, “The Paraconsistent God,” 180.



Göcke is premature in ruling out this possibility. In Göcke's terms, we can say that Sri Ramakrishna takes God to be qualitatively infinite but not maximally qualitatively infinite. While Göcke claims that God has *every* property and its negation, Sri Ramakrishna claims—on the experiential basis of *vijñāna*—that God has *some* properties and their negations: for instance, God is both personal and impersonal, both with and without form, both immanent and transcendent. Hence, Sri Ramakrishna's paraconsistent conception of God does not commit him to Göcke's implausible view that God is both evil and not evil, and so on.

Second, Göcke's two main arguments in favor of his conception of a maximally infinite God are unconvincing. His sweeping historical claim that Pseudo-Dionysius, Aquinas, and Cusa all adopted the view that God is maximally infinite is highly questionable. For instance, Göcke cites the following statement of Aquinas: "Since therefore God is the first effective cause of things, the perfections of all things must pre-exist in God in a more eminent way."<sup>75</sup> Göcke eisegetically interprets "perfections" as "properties" in order to make Aquinas's statement seem to support his own view that God is maximally infinite.<sup>76</sup> However, Aquinas's thesis that the "perfections of all things" preexist in God far more plausibly supports the view that God is qualitatively, but *not* maximally, infinite. Shortly after the passage cited by Göcke, Aquinas claims that since "life" and "wisdom" are perfections, "God's existence includes life and wisdom."<sup>77</sup> However, since evil is obviously not a perfection, Aquinas would reject Göcke's view that God is both evil and not evil.

Moreover, Göcke's philosophical argument in support of God's maximal infinitude is weak. According to Göcke, God is maximally infinite "*precisely because* God is the ultimate ground of empirical reality."<sup>78</sup> He continues: "The crucial intuition behind this, of course, is that the ultimate ground of qualitatively finite empirical reality has to have every property and its denial . . . or else it could not be the ultimate ground of empirical reality."<sup>79</sup> Göcke clearly does not take this "crucial intuition" to be self-evident, since he admits that "many analytic philosophers do not have this intuition concerning the ultimate ground of empirical reality."<sup>80</sup> Unfortunately, however, Göcke fails to provide any justification for

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75. Göcke, "The Paraconsistent God," 191.

76. Göcke, "The Paraconsistent God," 191. On p. 190 of the same article, Göcke does admit that his reading of Aquinas is "unconventional." The question, however, is whether this unconventional interpretation is justified. I argue that it is not.

77. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 2nd ed., trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: Burns, Oates, and Washbourne, 1920), 1a, 4, 2.

78. Göcke, "The Paraconsistent God," 198.

79. Göcke, "The Paraconsistent God," 198.

80. Göcke, "The Paraconsistent God," 198.

this intuition. Whether “ultimate ground” is understood as the cause of empirical reality or as its ontological condition of possibility, it is by no means obvious that the ultimate ground has to have all the properties, and their corresponding negations, of all empirical objects. Since Göcke does not adequately justify his view of a maximally qualitatively infinite God, the alternative view that God is qualitatively—but *not* maximally—infinite remains a live possibility.

Third, there is a tension between Göcke’s advocacy of a paraconsistent understanding of God’s infinity and his own definition of God as the “ultimate ground of empirical reality.” From Sri Ramakrishna’s perspective, Göcke limits—or finitizes—the Infinite God by defining Him only as the ontological ground of the universe. Sri Ramakrishna, I would argue, adopts a more fully paraconsistent approach to God than Göcke: if God is truly paraconsistent, then He must be *both* the ultimate ground of the universe *and* the transcendent nondual Brahman beyond the universe. As Sri Ramakrishna puts it, “*Prakṛti* or Śakti is the cause [*kāraṇ*] of everything in the universe. Brahman, the Pure Ātman, is the Cause of the cause [*kāraṇer kāraṇ*]. This Pure Ātman is our true nature” (*K* 608 / *G* 582). In Sri Ramakrishna’s terms, Göcke mistakenly takes the Śakti aspect of the Infinite God to exhaust God’s nature. Sri Ramakrishna, by contrast, adopts the more thoroughly paraconsistent view that the Infinite God is not only the dynamic Śakti but also the transcendent and impersonal Brahman-Ātman.

Fourth, instead of exploring the intimate connection between a paraconsistent approach to God and suprarational mystical experience, Göcke attempts, rather awkwardly, to justify a paraconsistent conception of God on the basis of a ratiocinative method which is itself bound to the law of contradiction.<sup>81</sup> As Göcke was well aware, two of the three Christian theologians to whom he refers—namely, Pseudo-Dionysius and Cusa—were well-known mystics who explicitly taught God’s infinity on the basis of their own mystical experiences.<sup>82</sup> Similarly, the Upaniṣadic seers frequently emphasized that their many paradoxical teachings about God’s nature stem from spiritual experience rather than

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81. In his feedback on an earlier draft of this chapter, Göcke responds to my objection as follows: “I perceive the limits and the advantage of this [my] method to be a bit like Wittgenstein’s ladder: You can use rational methods, didactically, to lead oneself to the insight into the nature of God.” While I agree with Göcke that rational methods are sometimes helpful in leading us to truths that transcend reason, I would argue that a paraconsistent conception of God is better justified on the basis of suprarational mystical testimony rather than a priori deductive argument.

82. See Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology*, in *Dionysius the Areopagite: On the Divine Names and the Mystical Theology*, trans. C. E. Rolt (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1920), 191–201; Jasper Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa’s Dialectical Mysticism: Text, Translation, and Interpretive Study of De Visione Dei*, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis: A.J. Banning Press, 1996).

ration. <sup>83</sup> Sri Ramakrishna agrees with such mystics that a paraconsistent approach to God—which, by definition, transcends discursive thought—has to be grounded in spiritual experience rather than discursive reasoning. As a *vijñānī*, Sri Ramakrishna claimed to have direct insight into God’s paraconsistent nature as the impersonal-personal Infinite Reality. In light of the fact that God’s paraconsistent nature eludes rational comprehension, Sri Ramakrishna’s mystically grounded conception of God’s infinitude arguably has greater *prima facie* plausibility than Göcke’s intellectual hypothesis of a maximally infinite God.

In short, while Göcke has made a compelling case that God’s infinite nature should be understood in paraconsistent terms, his own theory of a *maximally* qualitatively infinite God suffers from a number of weaknesses that undermine its plausibility. Sri Ramakrishna, I have argued, offers a more plausible account of God’s paraconsistent nature on the experiential basis of *vijñāna*: the impersonal-personal Divine Reality is paraconsistent in the sense of being qualitatively, but *not* maximally, infinite.

#### IV. Idol versus Icon: Sri Ramakrishna and Jean-Luc Marion

Marion, a contemporary French Catholic philosopher influenced heavily by Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida, presents a provocative and original account of God’s infinitude in his book *Dieu sans l'être* (*God without Being*; 1982). <sup>84</sup> In this section, I will bring Marion into dialogue with both Göcke and Sri Ramakrishna. According to Marion, the challenge for philosophers and theologians is to “think God without any conditions” by resisting the temptation to reduce God to their own measure. <sup>85</sup> Marion strives to meet this challenge by distinguishing two opposing paradigms for apprehending God: those of the idol and the icon. We make an idol out of God, Marion argues, whenever we limit God to what our “gaze can bear.” <sup>86</sup> The idol thereby functions as an “invisible mirror,” which reflects back to us nothing but our own epistemic expectations and limitations. <sup>87</sup>

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83. See, for instance, Īśā Upaniṣad 4–5, Taittirīya Upaniṣad 2.9.1, and Kaṭha Upaniṣad 1.2.23.

84. Jean-Luc Marion, *Dieu sans l'être: Hors-texte* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1982). Throughout this section, I cite this English translation: Jean-Luc Marion, *God without Being*, trans. Thomas Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

85. Marion, *God without Being*, 45.

86. Marion, *God without Being*, 14.

87. Marion, *God without Being*, 12.

For us moderns, the most common—and dangerous—form of idolatry is not the *material* depiction of God in wood or stone but the *conceptual* representation of God, the tendency to “fix the divine in a specific concept.”<sup>88</sup> As Marion puts it, “When a philosophical thought expresses a concept of what it then names ‘God,’ this concept functions exactly as an idol.”<sup>89</sup> Marion draws on Heidegger in order to clarify the dynamics of conceptual idolatry. According to Heidegger, philosophers since Descartes have defined God reductively as the *causa sui* (“self-cause”), the foundation of all that exists: “Man can neither pray nor sacrifice to this God. Before the *causa sui*, man can neither fall to his knees in awe nor can he play music and dance before this God.”<sup>90</sup> Building on Heidegger’s argument, Marion claims that the dominant philosophical conception of God as the *causa sui* is a paradigmatic instance of conceptual idolatry. “The *causa sui*,” Marion argues, “says so little about the ‘divine God’ that to assimilate it with the latter, even with the apologetic intention of furnishing a supposed proof, amounts to speaking crudely, even in blasphemy.”<sup>91</sup>

Invoking Saint Paul’s richly suggestive description of Christ as the “icon [*eikon*] of the invisible God,”<sup>92</sup> Marion claims that while the idol confines God blasphemously to a limited physical or conceptual representation, the icon engulfs us in an “infinite depth”<sup>93</sup> that summons us to reach *beyond* the visible to the invisible:

The icon . . . attempts to render visible the invisible as such, hence to allow that the visible not cease to refer to an other than itself, without, however, that other ever being reproduced in the visible. . . . It teaches the gaze, thus does not cease to correct it in order that it go back from visible to visible as far as the end of infinity, to find in infinity something new. The icon summons the gaze to surpass itself by never freezing on a visible, since the visible only presents itself here in view of the invisible. The gaze can never rest or settle if it looks at an icon; it always must rebound upon the visible, in order to go back in it up the infinite stream of the invisible. In this sense, the icon makes visible only by giving rise to an infinite gaze.<sup>94</sup>

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88. Marion, *God without Being*, 16.

89. Marion, *God without Being*, 16.

90. Cited in Marion, *God without Being*, 35.

91. Marion, *God without Being*, 35.

92. Colossians 1:15. Cited in Marion, *God without Being*, 17.

93. Marion, *God without Being*, 20.

94. Marion, *God without Being*, 18.

If the idol reduces the invisible God to the measure of our own gaze, the icon refuses to allow our gaze to settle on the visible, compelling it instead to “find in infinity something new.” The icon, Marion suggests, lets the invisible God appear, precisely by *refraining* from attempting to reproduce the invisible in the visible.

If the philosophical definition of God as the *causa sui* is the modern conceptual idol par excellence, are there other concepts that can serve as icons rather than as idols? Marion answers in the affirmative: “Valid as icon is the concept or group of concepts that reinforces the distinction of the visible and the invisible as well as their union, hence that increases the one all the more that it highlights the other.”<sup>95</sup> Marion’s notion of the conceptual icon is dialectical: precisely by highlighting the *inability* of the visible to convey the invisible God, the conceptual icon affirms the “union” of the visible and the invisible. According to Marion, Descartes at least hinted at one such conceptual icon by elaborating the “idea of God” in terms of the “idea of the infinite” (*idea infiniti*).<sup>96</sup> On the other hand, Descartes also helped inaugurate the distinctly modern *idolatry* of conceiving God as the *causa sui*.<sup>97</sup> Hence, Marion strives to recover the radicality of the Cartesian notion of divine infinitude by prising it apart from Descartes’s idolatrous definition of God as the *causa sui*. Infinitude is a conceptual icon, Marion argues, precisely because it refuses to allow us to rest satisfied with any finite conception of God.

For Marion, however, the most potent and profound conceptual icon is *agape* (“love”).<sup>98</sup> Marion claims that “as love, God can at once transgress idolatrous constraints.”<sup>99</sup> All conceptual idols specify conditions of possibility for God—for instance, the condition that God must be the *causa sui* or that God must *be* in the first place. By contrast, the conceptual icon of divine *agape* imposes no conditions on God: God “loves without condition,” and in return, we need only *accept* God’s love—“or, more modestly, not to steal away from it.”<sup>100</sup> In later chapters, Marion explores both the negative and the positive ways that God gives Himself to us as love. Negatively, the experiences of boredom and melancholy register the vanity of a life unresponsive to—or unaware of—God’s love.<sup>101</sup> Positively, the Christian

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95. Marion, *God without Being*, 23.

96. Marion, *God without Being*, 23.

97. Marion, *God without Being*, 35.

98. Marion, *God without Being*, 46–47.

99. Marion, *God without Being*, 47.

100. Marion, *God without Being*, 47.

101. Marion, *God without Being*, 108–38.

Eucharist and the confession of faith are unanalyzable “gifts” that embody, and transmit to us, God’s love.<sup>102</sup>

We can now bring Marion into conversation with Göcke and Sri Ramakrishna. Notice, first, that Göcke’s argument about the paraconsistent God exhibits a tension similar to the one Marion detects in Descartes. According to Marion, Descartes’s conception of God as the *causa sui* undermines his own thesis that God is the *idea infiniti*. Similarly, Göcke’s radical paraconsistent interpretation of divine infinity stands in tension with his narrow definition of God as the “ultimate ground of empirical reality.” Göcke, it is worth noting, contrasts his own account of God with the “anthropomorphic and idolatrous conceptions of the divine” favored by many analytic philosophers, “according to which God is very much like a human person except lacking a body and enjoying considerably more power.”<sup>103</sup> Ironically, however, Göcke himself is guilty of the very conceptual idolatry he finds in recent analytic philosophy: by defining God rigidly as the ultimate ground, Göcke robs God of His infinite majesty, love, and sovereignty. Marion might rightly complain, in a Heideggerian vein, that we can neither pray nor sacrifice to Göcke’s God.

Marion’s account of conceptual idolatry also helps clarify Sri Ramakrishna’s teaching that one can never put an *iti* (“end” or “limit”) to God. Epistemologically, putting an *iti* to God consists in limiting God to what we, with our finite intellects, can understand of Him. For instance, if believers in the formless God insist that God cannot have form, they put an *iti* to God by turning divine formlessness into a conceptual idol. Conversely, if worshippers of God with form insist that God cannot be formless, they put an *iti* to God by turning divine form into a conceptual idol. Sri Ramakrishna, in effect, shows how such conceptual idols function as “invisible mirrors” in Marion’s sense, reflecting back to worshippers their own limited understanding of God and their inability to fathom God’s infinite nature. Accordingly, Sri Ramakrishna would always encourage his visitors to adopt an attitude of epistemic humility before God: instead of committing the idolatry of reducing God to our own measure, we should humbly acknowledge that God’s infinite nature cannot be grasped by our limited intellects.

Some of Sri Ramakrishna’s most frequent visitors were followers of the Brāhmo Samāj, a religious movement that accepted only the formless personal God and, hence, rejected all forms and manifestations of God, including physical idols, various forms of deities, and divine incarnations such as Rāma and Kṛṣṇa. With Marion’s help, we can see how Sri Ramakrishna deftly turns the tables on the Brāhmos: in spite of their vociferous repudiation of idolatry, the Brāhmos’ own dogmatic assumption that God cannot have form is itself a tacit form of conceptual idolatry.

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102. Marion, *God without Being*, 161–82.

103. Göcke, “The Paraconsistent God,” 194.

On one occasion, Giriścandra Ghoṣ relates to Sri Ramakrishna the view of the young Narendra, who was then a staunch adherent of Brāhmo ideology: “Narendra says that God is infinite; we cannot even so much as say that the things or persons we perceive are parts of God. How can Infinity have parts? It cannot” (*K* 769 / *G* 725). Sri Ramakrishna immediately recognizes that Narendra’s Brāhmo view entails that God cannot incarnate in human form. In response to Giriś, Sri Ramakrishna observes, “However great and infinite God may be, His Essence can and does manifest itself in human form by His mere will” (*K* 769 / *G* 725). As a Brāhmo, Narendra assumes that God’s infinitude entails formlessness, since any form or manifestation of God would be finite and thereby contradict God’s infinitude. Sri Ramakrishna counters Narendra’s assumption with a more expansive conception of God’s infinitude: if God is truly infinite, then we must accept the possibility that God is capable of manifesting in various forms, even if we are unable to understand *how* the Infinite can reveal Himself in the finite. In Marion’s terms, we can say that Sri Ramakrishna wields the conceptual icon of divine infinitude in order to combat the conceptual idolatry of those who insist that God can only be formless.

While Marion focuses on the conceptual icons of infinitude and *agape*, Sri Ramakrishna adds a new dimension to Marion’s account by invoking what might be called “aesthetic icons.” Since Sri Ramakrishna was keenly aware of the limitations of conceptual discourse, he often preferred to teach and explain spiritual truths by employing literary devices such as metaphor, analogy, and parable. In Sri Ramakrishna’s hands, such literary devices prove to be potent Marionian icons that evoke God’s infinitude and challenge various forms of conceptual idolatry. For instance, Sri Ramakrishna uses a striking analogy to illustrate how the Infinite God can manifest as an *avatāra*: “We see God Himself if we but see His Incarnation. Suppose a person goes to the Ganges and touches its water. He will then say, ‘Yes, I have seen and touched the Ganges.’ To say this, it is not necessary for him to touch the whole length of the river from Haridwar to Gangasagar” (*K* 769 / *G* 726). Sri Ramakrishna would clearly agree with Saint Paul and Marion that the *avatāra* is an “icon of the invisible,” a real manifestation of the Infinite God. We touch the Ganges River itself when we touch the rushing Ganges water at any place in the river, but we also know that the small quantity of water we touch is only a tiny fraction of the river as a whole. Similarly, we actually perceive God Himself through a Divine Incarnation, who serves as a channel through which the Infinite God reveals Himself to us. At the same time, we commit the idolatry of limiting God whenever we confine Him to one particular form, manifestation, or incarnation.

Another analogy employed by Sri Ramakrishna to convey the mystery of the Divine Incarnation is that of a hole in a wall:

The “I” of *avatāras* and other *īśvarakoṭis* is a “thin ‘I’”: through it we are always able to see God. Take the case of a man who stands by a wall on



both sides of which there are meadows stretching to infinity. If there is a hole in the wall, through it he can see everything on the other side. If the hole is a big one, he can even pass through it. The “I” of *avatāras* and other *īśvarakoṭis* is like the wall with a hole. (K 811 / G 760)

I suspect that Marion would be delighted by Sri Ramakrishna’s analogy. Marion, we should recall, claims that the icon “teaches the gaze” to “go back from visible to visible as far as the end of infinity.” Sri Ramakrishna’s analogy is an icon in precisely this sense: just as we can see the infinite expanse on the other side of a wall by peeping through a hole, we can catch a glimpse of the Infinite God through an Incarnation. Notably, however, Sri Ramakrishna adopts the Hindu view that there are numerous Divine Incarnations. Marion, by contrast, mentions only Christ as an Incarnation and gives no indication anywhere in his book that there might be Incarnations other than Christ. However, from a Ramakrishnan standpoint, the logic of the Marionian icon necessitates the possibility of multiple Incarnations: if God is truly infinite, then God must be capable of manifesting in an infinite variety of ways. The traditional Christian dogma that Christ is the sole Incarnation of God—which Marion seems to accept—turns out to be another form of conceptual idolatry, since it limits the Infinite God to a single human manifestation.<sup>104</sup>

Sri Ramakrishna’s sophisticated strategy for countering conceptual idolatry is brought out in the following dialogue:

A BRĀHMO DEVOTEE: “Is God with or without form?”

MASTER: “No one can put an *iti* to God; He is formless, yet He also has forms.

For the *bhakta*, God assumes forms. But God is formless for the *jñānī*, who looks on the world as a mere dream. . . . Do you know what I mean? Think of the Divine Saccidānanda as an infinite ocean. Through the cooling influence, as it were, of the *bhakta*’s love, the water freezes at places into ice formations. In other words, God now and then assumes various forms for His *bhaktas* and reveals Himself to them as a Person. But with the rising of the sun of Knowledge, the formations of ice melt. Then one doesn’t feel any more that God is a Person, nor does one see God’s forms.” (K 99 / G 148)

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104. For an illuminating comparison of Hindu and Christian models of understanding divine incarnation, see Francis X. Clooney, *Hindu God, Christian God: How Reason Helps Break Down the Boundaries between Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 94–128. Clooney makes a convincing case that Christian theologians should take more seriously Hindu arguments for the possibility of multiple Incarnations of God.



Sri Ramakrishna begins by pointing out that the Brāhmo's question about God is based on the false assumption that God *either* has form *or* does not have form. By insisting that no one can put an *iti* to God, Sri Ramakrishna rejects the very terms of the Brāhmo's question. The Brāhmo's underlying assumption that God cannot be *both* with and without form reflects the limitations of the finite human intellect, which tends to think in terms of mutually exclusive alternatives. Hence, Sri Ramakrishna cautions the Brāhmo against committing the idolatry of projecting his own epistemic limitations onto God. For Sri Ramakrishna, we can avoid idolatry by acknowledging that "everything is possible for God" (*K* 997 / *G* 920). Accordingly, Sri Ramakrishna declares that God is "formless, yet He also has forms." From the standpoint of *vijñāna*, Sri Ramakrishna likens God to an infinite ocean—an aesthetic icon that nicely dramatizes the dynamic interplay of the finite and the infinite (or what Marion calls the "visible" and the "invisible"). Just as blocks of ice are nothing but the infinite ocean itself in another form, the formless Absolute and the various forms of the personal God are different aspects or statuses of one and the same Infinite Reality. The "sun of Knowledge" in Sri Ramakrishna's analogy serves as yet another aesthetic icon: by melting the ice-like forms of God, the sun of Knowledge prevents us from committing the idolatry of limiting God to any form in particular.

Significantly, Sri Ramakrishna invoked this ocean analogy in conversation not only with Brāhmos but also with religious practitioners of other persuasions. On one occasion, he used this analogy to teach the Advaita Vedāntin Haribabu—who only accepted the reality of the impersonal nondual Absolute—that the personal God as well as God's various forms are also real (*K* 861 / *G* 802). On another occasion, Sri Ramakrishna appealed to the same ocean analogy in order to teach a Vaiṣṇava Goswami, who worshipped the personal God Kṛṣṇa, that the formless, impersonal Absolute is as real as the forms of God (*K* 152 / *G* 191). Sri Ramakrishna employed this analogy of the ocean, then, as a powerful and versatile aesthetic icon to combat various forms of conceptual idolatry.

Our philosophical triangulation of Marion with Sri Ramakrishna and Göcke has already yielded substantial fruits. With the help of Marion, we have seen how Sri Ramakrishna employs an array of conceptual and aesthetic icons to encourage his interlocutors not to reduce the Infinite God to their limited human measure. Moreover, Marion's Heideggerian critique of philosophical accounts of God as the *causa sui* has aided us in pinpointing a tension in Göcke's argument between his paraconsistent theory of divine infinitude and his definition of God as the ultimate ground of empirical reality.

We can now subject Marion's own position to critical scrutiny by examining his account of God in the light of Sri Ramakrishna and Göcke. According to Marion, *agape* is the conceptual icon which best honors God's "unthinkable" infinitude.<sup>105</sup>

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105. Marion, *God without Being*, 46.

However, Göcke and Sri Ramakrishna make a compelling case that a truly infinite God is paraconsistent, in that He possesses attributes and aspects which appear contradictory to the finite human intellect. Arguably, then, Marion's understanding of God's unthinkable infinity is insufficiently radical, since it still presupposes the law of contradiction. Marion simply replaces the dominant philosophical understanding of God as the *causa sui* with his own Christian understanding of God as *agape*. From Sri Ramakrishna's standpoint, what remains unthought by Marion is the possibility that God is the paraconsistent Infinite Reality that is *both* the personal God of Love *and* the impersonal Absolute beyond subject-object duality. Ironically, while Marion strives to "think God without any conditions,"<sup>106</sup> he nonetheless lapses into conceptual idolatry by imposing the condition of divine personality onto God. Marion's concept of *agape* ultimately fails to serve as a true icon, since it confines God within the bounds of personality.

Sri Ramakrishna's spiritual paradigm of *vijñāna* enables us to think God "without any conditions" in a more radical and thoroughgoing manner than Marion's narrowly theistic paradigm. For Sri Ramakrishna, since "everything is possible for God," God is free from *all* limiting conditions, including even the law of contradiction. The first step in conceiving God without any conditions is to abandon the either-or paradigm of the rational intellect in favor of the both-and paradigm of *vijñāna*: the Infinite Reality is *both* personal and impersonal, *both* with and without form, *both* immanent and transcendent. While Sri Ramakrishna would agree with Marion that God is *agape*, he would also insist that the Infinite God cannot be *limited* to *agape*, since He is equally the impersonal nondual Absolute.

Sri Ramakrishna's perspective also highlights a serious lacuna in Marion's account of God as *agape*—namely, his total neglect of mystical experience. According to Marion, we are "sinners," so God's love remains "essentially inaccessible to us."<sup>107</sup> Hence, we can only experience God's love *negatively* through the existential states of boredom and melancholy, which drive home to us the sheer vanity of a life devoid of *agape*. Strangely, Marion ignores altogether the testimony of mystics in his own Catholic tradition—such as Saint Francis and Saint Teresa of Ávila—who claimed to have directly experienced God as *agape*. For instance, in her *Autobiography*, Saint Teresa describes her own rapturous experience of God's love in the third person: "It clearly sees that this love has come to it through no action of its own, but that out of the very great love that the Lord has for it a spark seems suddenly to have fallen on it and set it all on fire."<sup>108</sup>

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106. Marion, *God without Being*, 45.

107. Marion, *God without Being*, 3.

108. Teresa of Ávila, *The Life of Saint Teresa of Ávila by Herself*, trans. J. M. Cohen (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1958), 423.

While Marion assumes dogmatically that God's *agape* is inaccessible to us, Sri Ramakrishna adopts a more nuanced position that honors the mystical strain in most theistic traditions: while sinfulness *does* ordinarily debar us from experiencing God's Love, we can nonetheless have a positive experience of God as *agape* by overcoming our sinful nature through sincere spiritual practice and God's grace.

Sri Ramakrishna claimed to have realized this possibility in his own life by attaining perfection in various loving attitudes toward God, including those of a lover, parent, friend, child, and servant.<sup>109</sup> On the basis of his own spiritual experiences, Sri Ramakrishna declared that the highest form of *bhakti* is "*prema*," the ecstatic love of God: "But *prema* is an extremely rare thing. Caitanya had that love. When one has *prema* one forgets all outer things. One forgets the world. One even forgets one's own body, which is so dear to man" (*K* 301 / *G* 315). In fact, he would frequently affirm that the goal of human life is to experience the bliss of God's Love:

The whole thing is to love God and taste His sweetness [*mādhurya*]. God is sweetness [*rasa*] and the *bhakta* is its enjoyer [*rasik*]. The *bhakta* drinks the sweet Bliss of God. Further, God is the lotus and the *bhakta* the bee. The *bhakta* sips the honey of the lotus. As a *bhakta* cannot live without God, so also God cannot live without His *bhakta*. Then the *bhakta* becomes the sweetness, and God its enjoyer. The *bhakta* becomes the lotus, and God the bee. It is the Godhead that has become these two in order to enjoy Its own Bliss [*tinī nijer mādhurya āsvādan karbār jonno duṭi hoyechen*]. That is the significance of the episode of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa. (*K* 288 / *G* 305)

Here, Sri Ramakrishna goes much further than Marion in thinking through the logic of God as *agape*: since God is Love, He naturally makes His Love accessible to His beloved creatures. As Sri Ramakrishna puts it, Kṛṣṇa *becomes* His Lover Rādhā in order to enjoy His own bliss. Hence, from Sri Ramakrishna's mystical perspective, Marion mistakenly generalizes his own inability to experience God's Love to humanity as a whole, adopting the unduly pessimistic position that we can only become aware of God's Love negatively through boredom and melancholy.

We might even say, then, that Sri Ramakrishna out-Marions Marion by thinking through the logic of the icon more fully than Marion himself does. While Marion seems to presuppose the law of contradiction, Sri Ramakrishna adopts the paraconsistent view that God is both the personal God of *agape* and the impersonal nondual Absolute. Sri Ramakrishna also goes further than Marion in

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109. For details, see section I of Chapter 1.

pursuing the radical implications of divine infinity: while Marion takes Christ to be the sole incarnation of God, Sri Ramakrishna affirms that the Infinite God is capable of incarnating and manifesting in infinite ways. Finally, while Marion overhastily assumes that God's Love is inaccessible to us, Sri Ramakrishna teaches—on the basis of his own ecstatic experiences of divine *prema*—that God can, and does, graciously reveal Himself to mystics as *agape*.

This chapter has shown how Sri Ramakrishna's unique *vijñāna*-based conception of the Infinite God helps bridge Western and non-Western views on divine infinity. In the Indian philosophical context, Sri Ramakrishna goes even further than the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava Viśvanātha Cakravartin in harmonizing the personalist and impersonalist conceptions of divine infinity defended by Rāmānuja and Śaṅkara respectively. In the context of medieval Christian theology, Sri Ramakrishna's paraconsistent conception of God proves to bear striking affinities with Cusa's doctrine of the *coincidentia oppositorum*, but Sri Ramakrishna departs from Cusa in championing a full-blown religious pluralism and in acknowledging both the impersonal and personal aspects of the Infinite Reality. Finally, I argued that Sri Ramakrishna's radical approach to divine infinity resonates strongly with two contemporary Christian views—namely, Göcke's paraconsistent conception of God and Marion's theorization of divine infinity in terms of the logic of the icon. However, Sri Ramakrishna helps us see that Göcke and Marion remain committed to a narrowly theistic paradigm, which leads them to limit and finitize God in certain respects.





## RELIGIOUS PLURALISM



# 3

## “ALL FAITHS ARE PATHS”

### A RECONSTRUCTION AND DEFENSE OF SRI RAMAKRISHNA’S VIJÑĀNA-BASED MODEL OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

Contemporary philosophers and theologians have discussed a wide range of theories of religious pluralism, including John Hick’s well-known quasi-Kantian theory, David Ray Griffin’s Whiteheadian theory, Paul Knitter’s soteriocentric theory, and Mark Heim’s “multiple salvations” theory.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, Sri Ramakrishna’s pioneering teachings on religious pluralism have been largely ignored. On the basis of his own spiritual experiences and eclectic religious practices, Sri Ramakrishna taught the harmony of all religions: “With sincerity and earnestness one can realize God through all religions” (*K* 151 / *G* 191). However, there is a great deal of scholarly controversy regarding precisely *how* Sri Ramakrishna harmonized the various religions and spiritual philosophies. Three interpretations of his views on religious diversity are especially prevalent.

Frank Morales and Stephen Prothero, among others, have attributed to Sri Ramakrishna the view that all religions are essentially the same and that their differences are negligible.<sup>2</sup> As Morales puts it, Sri

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1. John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1989), 233–97; David Ray Griffin, “Religious Pluralism: Generic, Identist, and Deep,” in *Deep Religious Pluralism: Whitehead’s Philosophy and Religious Diversity*, ed. David Ray Griffin (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 3–38; David Ray Griffin, “John Cobb’s Whiteheadian Complementary Pluralism,” in *Deep Religious Pluralism*, ed. Griffin, 39–66; Paul Knitter, “Dialogue and Liberation,” *Drew Gateway* 58.1 (1987), 1–53; S. Mark Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995).

2. See Frank Morales, *Radical Universalism: Does Hinduism Teach That All Religions Are the Same?* (New Delhi: Voice of India, 2008) and Stephen Prothero, *God Is Not One* (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 99 and 194. Similarly, Christopher Bartley refers to Sri Ramakrishna’s “belief in the essential sameness of all religions.” “Modern Vedānta,” in *Brill’s Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, vol. 3, ed. Knut Jacobsen et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 738.



Ramakrishna subscribed to a “radical universalism,” the view that “all religions are the same, with the same purpose, goal, experientially tangible salvific state, and object of ultimate devotion.”<sup>3</sup>

By contrast, numerous scholars have claimed that Sri Ramakrishna harmonized the world religions from the standpoint of a particular philosophical or religious sect. Svāmī Dhīreśānanda, Swami Ghanananda, and Swami Ashokananda have argued that Sri Ramakrishna harmonized the world religions on the philosophical basis of Advaita Vedānta, which holds that the sole reality is *nirguṇa* Brahman, the attributeless nondual Absolute.<sup>4</sup> For instance, according to Svāmī Dhīreśānanda, Sri Ramakrishna maintained that the common goal of all religions is the “direct spiritual experience of Vedāntic *nirguṇa* Brahman.”<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, Jeffrey Kripal claims that Sri Ramakrishna’s ultimate standpoint was Śākta rather than Advaitic. According to Kripal, Sri Ramakrishna, like the Śākta poet Rāmprasād, took the Goddess Kālī to be “the actress behind the world’s religious masks.”<sup>6</sup>

A third group of scholars—including Satis Chandra Chatterjee, Swami Tapasyananda, and Jeffery Long—argue that Sri Ramakrishna’s religious pluralism derives from his capacious, nonsectarian Vedāntic conception of God as the impersonal-personal Infinite Reality.<sup>7</sup> According to these scholars, Sri

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3. Morales, “Radical Universalism,” 3.

4. Swami Ghanananda, *Sri Ramakrishna and His Unique Message* (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 1969), 107–33; Swami Ashokananda, *A Call to the Eternal* (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 1995), 125–51; Svāmī Ōmkārānanda, “*Brahma o Sakti abhed*,” *Udbodhan* 66.5 (1964), 227–32; Svāmī Ōmkārānanda, “*Nitya o Līlā*,” *Udbodhan* 66.6 (1964), 287–96; Svāmī Dhīreśānanda, “*Svāmī Vivekānanda o Advaitavāda*,” *Udbodhan* 65.2 (1962), 73–80 and 65.3 (1962), 80–81, 138–44; Svāmī Dhīreśānanda, “*Nānā Dr̥ṣṭite Śrīrāmākṛṣṇa*,” *Udbodhan* 82.5 (1980), 220–26.

5. Svāmī Dhīreśānanda, “*Svāmī Vivekānanda o Advaitavāda*,” 144.

6. Jeffrey Kripal, *The Serpent’s Gift: Gnostic Reflections on the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 102–3.

7. Swami Tapasyananda, *Sri Ramakrishna’s Thoughts in a Vedantic Perspective* (Mylapore, India: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1993), 135–50; Satis Chandra Chatterjee, “Vivekananda’s Neo-Vedantism and Its Practical Application,” in *Vivekananda: The Great Spiritual Teacher* (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 1995), 255–80; Satis Chandra Chatterjee, “Sri Ramakrishna: A Life of Manifold Spiritual Realization,” in *Sri Ramakrishna: The Great Prophet of Harmony* (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 1986), 340–47; Swami Bhajanananda, *Harmony of Religions from the Standpoint of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda* (Kolkata: Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 2008); Jeffery D. Long, “Advaita and Dvaita: Bridging the Gap—the Ramakrishna Tradition’s Both/And Approach to the Dvaita/Advaita Debate,” *Journal of Vaishnava Studies* 16.2 (Spring 2008), 49–70; Jeffery D. Long, “(Tentatively) Putting the Pieces Together: Comparative Theology in the Tradition of Sri Ramakrishna,” in *The New Comparative Theology*, ed. Francis X. Clooney (London: Continuum, 2010), 151–70; Jeffery D. Long, *A Vision for Hinduism* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007); Ayon Maharaj, “Śrī Rāmākṛṣṇa’s Philosophy of Vijñāna Vedānta,” *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 21.1 (2017), 25–54.

Ramakrishna maintains that the various religions are different paths to the realization of God in any of His innumerable aspects or forms. As Swami Tapasyananda puts it, Sri Ramakrishna taught that all religions lead to "the same Infinite Personal-Impersonal being, in spite of the different versions they give of it and the differing paths they prescribe to their aspirants."<sup>8</sup>

In this chapter, I will defend this third interpretive approach and argue that it is much more plausible and nuanced than the other two approaches. Sectarian interpretations of Sri Ramakrishna's views tend to be Procrustean, since they fail to account for his nonsectarian acceptance of all religious and spiritual paths.<sup>9</sup> Hence, it is implausible to interpret Sri Ramakrishna's views on religious pluralism from a narrow sectarian standpoint, be it Advaitic, Śākta, or otherwise. It is equally implausible to interpret Sri Ramakrishna as a "radical universalist" in Morales's sense, since he taught not that all religions are the "same" but that all religions are *different* paths to the common goal of God-realization. Moreover, according to Sri Ramakrishna, every religious practitioner can realize God in the particular aspect he or she prefers. For instance, while the Advaitin aims to realize the impersonal (*nirguṇa*) aspect of the Infinite Reality, *bhaktas* strive to realize various personal (*saguṇa*) aspects and forms of the same Infinite Reality.

Section I provides a detailed reconstruction of Sri Ramakrishna's model of religious pluralism on the basis of his teachings in the *Kathāmṛta*. Building on chapter 1, I argue that Sri Ramakrishna's views on the harmony of religions are based on his own mystical experience of *vijñāna*, the "Intimate Knowledge" of God as the impersonal-personal Infinite Reality. As a *vijñānī*, Sri Ramakrishna champions the religious pluralist doctrine that there are infinite paths to the Infinite Reality. Drawing on the recent work of Perry Schmidt-Leukel, I clarify the precise sense in which Sri Ramakrishna was a religious pluralist. According to Sri Ramakrishna, every religion is an effective means of attaining the common salvific goal of God-realization, the direct spiritual experience of God in any of His innumerable aspects or forms.

As Hick and many others have pointed out, any viable theory of religious pluralism has to confront head-on the thorny problem of conflicting religious truth-claims. How are we to reconcile the apparently conflicting claims made by the world religions regarding such matters as human destiny, eschatology, and the nature of the ultimate reality? Section II reconstructs Sri Ramakrishna's sophisticated and multifaceted answer to this very difficult question. He reconciles religious claims about the nature of the ultimate reality on the basis of his distinctive

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8. Swami Tapasyananda, *Sri Ramakrishna's Thoughts in a Vedantic Perspective*, 147.

9. See chapter 1 for a detailed defense of a nonsectarian interpretation of Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy.

*viññāna*-based ontology of God: every religion captures a uniquely real aspect of the impersonal-personal Infinite Reality. Regarding other types of religious truth-claims, he claims that every religion errs on some points of doctrine but that these errors do not substantially diminish the salvific efficacy of religions.

Section III addresses some of the major criticisms leveled against Sri Ramakrishna's religious pluralism. While some scholars have accused him of subscribing to a "radical universalism" that fails to honor the very real differences among religions, others have argued—on the contrary—that his model of religious pluralism privileges certain worldviews and spiritual paths over others and is therefore more inclusivist than pluralist. Drawing on my reconstruction of Sri Ramakrishna's religious pluralism in sections I and II, I argue that such criticisms stem from a misunderstanding and oversimplification of his views.

## I. A Reconstruction of Sri Ramakrishna's Model of Religious Pluralism

Crucially, Sri Ramakrishna's teachings on the harmony of religions were based on his own numerous spiritual experiences and religious practices. As I described in detail in section I of chapter 1, he practiced not only a variety of Hindu disciplines—including the theistic practices of Vaiṣṇavism and Śāktism and the nontheistic practice of Advaita Vedānta—but also Islamic and Christian religious methods. After following each of these spiritual paths, he claimed to have realized different forms and aspects of one and the same Divine Reality. Sri Ramakrishna's spiritual journey culminated in the unique experience of *viññāna*, the "Intimate Knowledge" that the Infinite God is at once the impersonal (*nirguṇa*) Brahman and the personal (*saguṇa*) Lord who both rules and pervades the universe.<sup>10</sup> Instead of remaining merged in the impersonal Absolute, a *viññānī* such as Sri Ramakrishna revels in various manifestations and aspects of God, both personal and impersonal.

On the basis of his experience of *viññāna*, Sri Ramakrishna affirmed that "[t]here is no limit to God" (*K* 997 / *G* 920): the Infinite God is both personal and impersonal, both with and without form, both immanent in the universe and beyond it. Accordingly, he made the radical claim that the personal and impersonal aspects of the Infinite Reality are equally real. As he frequently remarked, "Brahman and Śakti are inseparable" (*K* 568 / *G* 550), which means that the impersonal Brahman and the personal Śakti have equal ontological reality.<sup>11</sup> From

10. For an in-depth discussion of Sri Ramakrishna's experience of *viññāna* and its philosophical implications, see section III of chapter 1.

11. I provide a detailed interpretation of this key teaching in my discussion of VV3 in section III of chapter 1.

this expansive standpoint of *vijñāna*, Sri Ramakrishna taught that various theistic and nontheistic spiritual philosophies are equally effective paths to realizing God: "The *vijñānī* sees that the Reality which is impersonal [*nirguṇa*] is also personal [*saguṇa*]. . . . The *jñānī*'s path leads to Truth, as does the path that combines *jñāna* and *bhakti*. The *bhakta*'s path, too, leads to Truth. *Jñānayoga* [the nontheistic Path of Knowledge] is true, and *bhaktiyoga* [the theistic Path of Devotion] is true. God can be realized through all paths" (*K* 51 / *G* 103–4). The *vijñānī*, who has realized the truth of both the personal and impersonal aspects of God, affirms the equal salvific efficacy of *bhaktiyoga* and *jñānayoga*. For Sri Ramakrishna, *jñānayoga* encompasses nontheistic spiritual philosophies such as Advaita Vedānta and Buddhism,<sup>12</sup> while *bhaktiyoga* encompasses theistic religions such as Christianity, Islam, and the Brāhmo Samāj, as well as theistic Hindu sects like Vaiṣṇavism and Śāktism.<sup>13</sup>

Sri Ramakrishna's religious pluralism, then, derives directly from his *vijñāna*-based conception of God as the impersonal-personal Infinite Reality. Since God is infinite, there must be correspondingly infinite ways of approaching and ultimately realizing God. As he succinctly puts it, "God is infinite, and the paths to God are infinite" (*tinī ananta, patho ananta*) (*K* 511 / *G* 506). From Sri Ramakrishna's standpoint, God is conceived and worshipped in different ways by people of varying temperaments, preferences, and worldviews. Hence, a sincere practitioner of any religion can realize God in the particular form or aspect he or she prefers.

Indeed, Sri Ramakrishna goes even further by providing a divine rationale for the differences in the various world religions:

Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Śāktas, Śaivas, Vaiṣṇavas, the Brahmajñānīs of the time of the rishis, and you, the Brahmajñānīs of modern times [members of the Brāhmo Samāj], all seek the same object. A mother prepares dishes to suit the stomachs of her children. Suppose a mother has five children and a fish is bought for the family. She doesn't cook pilau or Kālā for all of them. All have not the same power of digestion; so she prepares a simple stew for some. But she loves all her children equally. . . . Do you know what the truth is? God has made different religions to suit different aspirants, times, and countries. All faiths are paths; but a doctrine or faith is by no means God Himself. [*deś-kal-pātra bhede īśvar nānā dharma korechen. kintu sab matī path, mat kichu īśvar noy.*] Indeed, one

12. Section III of this chapter addresses in detail Sri Ramakrishna's Vedāntic interpretation of Buddhism.

13. See *K* 151 / *G* 191.

can reach God if one follows any of the paths with wholehearted devotion. (*K* 577 / *G* 559)

Just as a mother prepares fish in different ways for her five children, God Himself—in His infinite wisdom—has made different religions to suit people of differing temperaments, cultural preferences, and spiritual capacities. Just as all five children eat the same fish in a variety of forms, practitioners of various religions worship one and the same God in numerous forms and call Him by various names. Moreover, just as it would be foolish to claim that one particular fish preparation is objectively better than all the others, it is foolish to claim that one religion is objectively superior to all others. Each child's hunger is fully appeased by eating the particular fish preparation she prefers. Similarly, all religions are effective paths to the common goal of realizing God in the particular form or aspect each person prefers.

Sri Ramakrishna sums up his teachings on religious pluralism in the striking statement: "All faiths are paths; but a doctrine or faith is by no means God Himself." He suggests here that one of the main sources of religious conflict and fanaticism is the tendency to confuse means and end. Instead of practicing a particular religion as a means to the end of spiritual fulfillment, religious dogmatists tend to absolutize religious doctrine itself, thereby losing sight of the Divine Reality that is the goal of all religions. From Sri Ramakrishna's mystical standpoint, since all religious doctrines are expressed in human language, they can never be fully adequate to the Divine Reality that lies beyond words and thought, but they can nonetheless serve as effective "paths" to the direct spiritual experience of the Divine Reality. He sears this message into the minds of his visitors by means of an ingenious wordplay, repeatedly conjoining the rhyming Bengali monosyllables *mat* ("doctrine" or "faith") and *path* ("path"). As he puts it on several occasions, "*mat path*" ("Every doctrine is a path") and "*ananto path ananto mat*" ("Infinite are the paths and infinite the doctrines") (*K* 111 / *G* 158).

Sri Ramakrishna would often recite his favorite parable of the chameleon in order to convey the harmony of religions from the standpoint of *vijñāna*:

Once a man entered a forest and saw a small animal on a tree. He came back and told another man that he had seen a creature of a beautiful red color on a certain tree. The second man replied: "When I went into the forest, I also saw that animal. But why do you call it red? It is green." Another man who was present contradicted them both and insisted that it was yellow. Presently others arrived and contended that it was grey, violet, blue, and so forth and so on. At last they started quarrelling among themselves. To settle the dispute, they all went to the tree. They saw a man sitting under it. On being asked, he replied: "Yes, I live under this tree and

I know the animal very well. All your descriptions are true. Sometimes it appears red, sometimes yellow, and at other times blue, violet, grey, and so forth. It is a chameleon. And sometimes it has no color at all. Now it has a color, and now it has none.”

In like manner, one who constantly thinks of God can know God’s real nature; he alone knows that God reveals Himself to seekers in various forms and aspects. God is personal [*saguṇa*] as well as impersonal [*nirguṇa*]. Only the man who lives under the tree knows that the chameleon can appear in various colors, and he knows, further, that the animal at times has no color at all. It is the others who suffer from the agony of futile argument. (*K* 101 / *G* 149–50)

Like the chameleon which appears in various colors and sometimes has no color at all, God assumes various forms for different types of spiritual aspirants.<sup>14</sup> While most people make the mistake of thinking that the chameleon only has the color which they see it as having, the man always sitting under the tree sees that the chameleon has various colors and, hence, that everyone is partially correct. The colorless chameleon corresponds to *nirguṇa* Brahman, while the chameleon with various colors corresponds to *saguṇa* Śakti, and it is clear that Sri Ramakrishna does not privilege *nirguṇa* Brahman in any way. As we saw earlier in this section, Sri Ramakrishna consistently maintains that the impersonal Brahman and the personal Śakti have equal ontological reality. The man sitting under the tree represents the *vijñānī*—such as Sri Ramakrishna himself—who has realized both the *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa* aspects of God and hence affirms on the basis of his own spiritual experience that all religions are salvifically effective paths.<sup>15</sup>

Sri Ramakrishna’s chameleon parable also helps clarify the common goal of God-realization to which all spiritual paths lead. While the Śāṅkara Advaitin hegemonically imposes the goal of realizing *nirguṇa* Brahman onto all the world religions, the chameleon parable implies a very broad and nonhegemonic soteriological outlook: people of varying temperaments can realize the Infinite God in any of His innumerable forms and aspects, all of which are real. Although

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14. The limitation of this parable is that the chameleon can only be one color at a given time, while God can assume various forms and aspects *simultaneously*. Sri Ramakrishna’s parable of the blind men and the elephant, which I will discuss below, makes clear that just as the various blind men touch different parts of the elephant at the same time, God assumes different forms simultaneously.

15. See Swami Tapasyananda’s helpful discussion of Sri Ramakrishna’s chameleon parable from the standpoint of *vijñāna* in *Bhakti Schools of Vedānta* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1990), 29–30.

different people see the chameleon in different colors, they all see *one and the same chameleon*.

Sri Ramakrishna's nonhegemonic outlook is also captured by the well-known parable of the blind men and the elephant, which he was fond of reciting:

One can rightly speak of God only after one has seen Him. He who has seen God knows really and truly that God has form and that He is formless as well. He has many other aspects that cannot be described. Once some blind men chanced to come near an elephant. A person explained to them, "This animal is an elephant." They were asked what the elephant was like. The blind men began to feel its body. One of them said the elephant was like a pillar; he had touched only its leg. Another said it was like a winnowing-fan; he had touched only its ear. In this way the others, having touched its tail or belly, gave their different versions of the elephant. Just so, a man who has seen only one aspect of God limits God to that alone. It is his conviction that God cannot be anything else. (*K* 151 / *G* 191)

From Sri Ramakrishna's perspective, religious exclusivism and fanaticism stem from limiting God dogmatically to what one has understood or experienced of Him.<sup>16</sup> Since "[t]here is no limit to God," we should humbly acknowledge that God may have various aspects and forms of which we cannot conceive (*K* 997 / *G* 920). Moreover, just as the person with sight can see the elephant as a whole, the *vijñānī* sees that all religions are salvifically effective, since all of them—represented by the blind men—make contact with a real aspect of God, though none of them encompasses the *whole* of God, who is infinite and illimitable.

Since both the sighted person in the elephant parable and the man living under the tree in the chameleon parable represent Sri Ramakrishna's *vijñānī*, one might be led to assume that the *vijñānī* realizes God in all His aspects. However, Sri Ramakrishna insists that *no one*—not even the *vijñānī*—can have complete knowledge of God in His infinite fullness:

People often think they have understood Brahman fully. Once an ant went to a hill of sugar. One grain filled its stomach. Taking another grain in its mouth it started homeward. On its way it thought, "Next time I will carry home the whole hill." That is the way shallow minds think. They don't know that Brahman is beyond words and thought. However great a man may be, how much can he know of Brahman? Śukadeva and sages like

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16. It is clear from Sri Ramakrishna's own explanation of the elephant parable and his other teachings about God that the elephant parable should not be taken to imply that God is divided into parts.



him may have been big ants; but even they could carry at the utmost eight or ten grains of sugar! (*K* 49 / *G* 102)

Sri Ramakrishna makes clear that the difference between an ordinary soul and a *viññānī* is like the difference between a small ant and a big ant. While the ordinary soul is able, at best, to realize God in one particular aspect, the *viññānī* realizes multiple aspects of God—both impersonal and personal—and so is in a unique position to affirm the equal salvific efficacy of theistic and nontheistic religions. Even a big ant, however, cannot carry the “whole hill of sugar.” That is, since God is infinite, even the *viññānī* cannot realize the *whole* of God. According to Sri Ramakrishna, sincere practitioners of all religious faiths can attain the goal of God-realization, even though they may end up realizing different forms or aspects of one and the same Infinite Reality.

Some important questions arise at this point. What counts as a “religion” in the first place for Sri Ramakrishna? When he teaches that “all religions” are paths to God, what religions does he have in mind? Does he affirm the *equal* salvific efficacy of all religions or does he claim that some religions have greater salvific efficacy than others? We can begin to address these questions by considering a relevant passage from the *Kathāmṛta*:

With sincerity and earnestness one can realize God through all religions [*āntarik hole sab dharmer bhitor diyāi īśvarke pāwā jāi*]. The Vaiṣṇavas will realize God, and so will the Śāktas, the [Advaita] Vedāntins, and the Brāhmos [who worship the formless personal God]. Muslims and Christians will realize Him, too. All will certainly realize God if they are earnest and sincere. (*K* 151 / *G* 191)

It is highly significant that Sri Ramakrishna grants the status of “religion” (*dharma*) not only to major world religions such as Christianity and Islam but also to the modern religious movement of the Brāhmo Samāj. Evidently, his conception of religion is sufficiently dynamic and flexible to accommodate new religious movements and spiritual philosophies. This flexible attitude is entirely in keeping with his teaching that the “paths to God are infinite” (*K* 511 / *G* 506), which indicates that he has in mind not only the finite set of existing religious paths but also the innumerable religious paths that are to come.

Sri Ramakrishna typically uses the Bengali terms *dharma* and *mat* to refer to religious and spiritual views. Although he does not provide an explicit definition of religion anywhere in the *Kathāmṛta*, he does provide hints at various places that any religious or spiritual path must fulfill two conditions: first, it must have at its center some aspect or form of the Divine Reality, whether personal or impersonal; second, it must prescribe ethical and spiritual practices that bring us



into contact with that Divine Reality. He explicitly specifies this first condition of religion in numerous passages, such as this one: “But I find that all views point to the One. All views [*mat*]<sup>17</sup>—the Śākta, the Vaiṣṇava, the Advaitic—have that One [*sei ek*] for their center. He who is impersonal is also personal, and it is He again who assumes various forms” (*K* 494 / *G* 490). It is clear from this passage that his broad conception of religion encompasses not only theistic faiths such as Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity but also nontheistic spiritual philosophies such as Advaita Vedānta. For Sri Ramakrishna, every religion has one and the same God at its center, whether God is conceived as personal or impersonal. It is worth noting, then, that he would not consider secular humanism or Marxism to be “religions,” since they do not meet this first condition.

As for the second condition, Sri Ramakrishna believed that while the specific ethical and spiritual practices prescribed by various religions differ, all these religious practices have the common aim of diminishing egoism and selfishness in order to bring us closer to the Divine Reality. Accordingly, he frequently emphasizes the need to eliminate the selfish attitude of “I” and “mine” (*K* 292 / *G* 308) and to cultivate ethical virtues such as compassion and forbearance, which purify the mind.<sup>17</sup> Exploiting the etymological affinity between *dharma* in the sense of “religion” and *dharma* in the sense of ethical action, he defines *adharma* as “unrighteous actions” (*asat karma*) and *dharma* as “pious actions prescribed by religion” (*vaidhī karma*), such as “charity to the poor, feeding the Brahmins, and so on” (*K* 669 / *G* 635). Clearly, then, any self-styled “religion” that prescribes unethical practices—such as violence, hatred, or excessive sense-indulgence—would not count as a “religion” (*dharma*) in Sri Ramakrishna’s sense.<sup>18</sup> Accordingly, he condemns the immoral behavior of a monk who tries to give an Advaitic justification for breaking his monastic vow of celibacy:

Once a monk came to the Panchavati. He used to talk much about [Advaita] Vedānta before others. Later I came to know that he was having an illicit love affair with a certain woman. After that, when I went to the Panchavati, I found him sitting there. I said to him, “You talk so glibly of Vedānta—now, what is this?” “What of that?,” he replied, “I shall show you that there is no harm in it. If the whole world is unreal at all times, how can my fall alone be real?” I said in utter disgust, “I spit on

17. See, for instance, *K* 47 / *G* 101.

18. A referee asks whether Sri Ramakrishna would have accepted the modern religiously inspired terrorist groups such as ISIS and Aum Shinrikyo as genuine “religions.” I believe Sri Ramakrishna would not have accepted them as “religions” (*dharma*), since they prescribe unethical practices that violate the second condition that any religion must meet.

such knowledge of Vedānta." That knowledge is no knowledge at all; it is a mere sham, falsely professed by worldly people with attachments to sense-pleasures. (*LP* I.iii.38 / *DP* 428)

Sri Ramakrishna does not consider the pseudo-Vedānta practiced by this fallen monk to be a genuine religious path, since it sanctions unethical behavior that strengthens rather than diminishes egoism and selfishness.

Therefore, when Sri Ramakrishna declares that "one can realize God through all religions," he does *not* mean that all self-styled religions are salvifically efficacious paths to God. Rather, he means that all *genuine* religions—a "genuine" religion defined as any religious path that meets the two conditions specified above—are paths to God. In numerous passages concerning the harmony of religions, he specifically mentions Christianity, Islam, the theistic Hindu sects of Śāktism and Vaiṣṇavism, the nontheistic Hindu philosophy of Advaita Vedānta, and the Brāhmo Samāj.<sup>19</sup> Although he does not mention Buddhism in the context of the harmony of religions, he mentions on numerous occasions that Buddhism is a form of nontheistic *jñānayoga* akin to Advaita Vedānta.<sup>20</sup> Hence, by dint of mentioning Advaita Vedānta in the passages concerning the harmony of religions, he thereby implies that Buddhism is also a salvifically efficacious religious path.

The various analogies invoked by Sri Ramakrishna strongly suggest that he grants maximal salvific efficacy to all of these religious paths. For instance, in the passage cited above, he likens the world religions to different preparations of fish, which suit different tastes and digestive capacities. Elsewhere, he likens the various religions to different, but equally effective, means of climbing to the roof of a house: "God can be realized through all paths. All religions are true. The important thing is to reach the roof. You can reach it by stone stairs or by wooden stairs or by bamboo steps or by a rope. You can also climb up by a bamboo pole" (*K* 59–60 / *G* 111). He also frequently invokes the analogy of a lake called by various names:

It is not good to feel that one's own religion alone is true and all others are false. God is one only, and not two. Different people call on Him by different names: some as Allah, some as God, and others as Kṛṣṇa, Śiva, and Brahman. It is like the water in a lake. Some drink it at one place and call it "*jal*," others at another place and call it "*pānī*," and still others at a third

19. See, for instance, *K* 151 / *G* 191 and *K* 577 / *G* 559.

20. See, for instance, *K* 1028 / *G* 947–48. I discuss Sri Ramakrishna's Advaitic interpretation of Buddhism in section III.

place and call it “water.” The Hindus call it “*jal*,” the Christians “water,” and the Muslims “*pānī*.” But it is one and the same thing. Views are but paths. Each religion is only a path leading to God, as rivers come from different directions and ultimately become one in the one ocean. (*K* 239 / *G* 264–65)

The main point of all these analogies is to illustrate the equal salvific efficacy of the world religions. From Sri Ramakrishna’s standpoint, claiming that one’s own religion is superior to other religions is as absurd as claiming that the fish preparation one prefers is somehow objectively superior to other fish preparations or that a bamboo pole is superior to a staircase as a means of reaching the roof. As we have seen, Sri Ramakrishna’s experience of *viññāna* provided direct confirmation of this religious pluralist viewpoint: since both the personal and impersonal aspects of the Divine Reality are equally real, both theistic and nontheistic religious paths have equal salvific efficacy.

In short, Sri Ramakrishna grants maximal salvific efficacy to Christianity, Islam, Hinduism (which includes both theistic Hindu traditions and Advaita Vedānta), the Brāhmo Samāj, and Buddhism. It is also worth noting that he mentions these religions by way of example, so his failure to mention other religions such as Judaism, Taoism, and Confucianism does not imply that he takes these religions to be less salvifically effective than the religions he does mention. On the other hand, he does explicitly claim that certain religious paths are less salvifically effective than other religious paths. For instance, while he admits that *vāmācāra*—the path of “left-handed” Tantra, which involves sexual intercourse as part of its spiritual practice—is a genuine path to realizing God, he insists that *vāmācāra* is inferior to other religious paths. In response to Narendranāth’s question about the *vāmācāra* practices of certain sects such as Ghoṣpārā and Pañcanāmī, Sri Ramakrishna tells him:

You need not listen to these things. The *bhairavas* and the *bhairavīs* of the Tāntrika sect also follow this kind of discipline. . . . Let me tell you this. I regard woman as my mother; I regard myself as her son. This is a very pure attitude. There is no danger in it. . . . But to assume the attitude of a “hero” [*vīra*], to look on woman as one’s mistress, is a very difficult discipline. Tarak’s father performed spiritual practice with this attitude. In this form of *sādhana* one cannot always maintain the right attitude.

There are various paths to reach God. Each view is a path. It is like reaching the Kālī temple by different roads. But it must be said that some paths are clean and some dirty. It is good to travel on a clean path. (*K* 594 / *G* 571–72)

While Sri Ramakrishna admits that there are sincere practitioners of *vāmācāra*—such as Tarak’s father—who may be able to realize God through that path, he insists that *vāmācāra* is nonetheless a “dirty” path, since it involves sexual practices that can easily lead the spiritual aspirant to ruin.

Sri Ramakrishna’s stance toward *haṭhayoga*, a practice based on physical exercises, is similar to his stance toward *vāmācāra*: while he accepts *haṭhayoga* as a path to God-realization, he claims that it is inferior to the path of *rājayoga*, a practice based on meditation and devotion to God. He states:

There are two kinds of Yoga: *haṭhayoga* and *rājayoga*. The *haṭhayogī* practises physical exercises. His goal is to acquire supernatural powers: longevity and the eight psychic powers. These are his aims. But the aim of *rājayoga* is the attainment of devotion, ecstatic love, knowledge, and dispassion. Of these two, *rājayoga* is the better. (*K* 214 / *G* 244–45)

Elsewhere, he points out that one of the main problems with *haṭhayoga* is that it strengthens identification with the body, which is a serious hindrance to God-realization.<sup>21</sup>

For Sri Ramakrishna, then, while Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, the Brāhmo Samāj, and Buddhism have equal and maximal salvific efficacy, certain religious paths such as *vāmācāra* and *haṭhayoga* are less salvifically effective than other religious paths. He judges the degree of salvific efficacy of various religious paths on the basis of a largely implicit criterion: the religious paths he deems to have maximal salvific efficacy are those that inculcate ethical and spiritual practices that diminish egoism, selfishness, and body-consciousness, thereby bringing us closer to God. Conversely, religious paths that prescribe practices that run the risk of strengthening egoism and body-consciousness are less salvifically effective paths.

We can further clarify Sri Ramakrishna’s views on religious diversity by relating them to the now well-known threefold typology of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism, first developed by the Christian theologian Alan Race in 1983.<sup>22</sup> In a recent article, Schmidt-Leukel provides very precise and rigorous definitions of these three positions:

- (1) *Exclusivism*: Salvific knowledge of a transcendent reality is mediated by only one religion (which naturally will be one’s own).

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21. See *K* 604 / *G* 579.

22. Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions* (London: SCM Press, 1983).

- (2) *Inclusivism*: Salvific knowledge of a transcendent reality is mediated by more than one religion (not necessarily by all of them), but only one of these mediates it in a uniquely superior way (which again will naturally be one's own).
- (3) *Pluralism*: Salvific knowledge of a transcendent reality is mediated by more than one religion (not necessarily by all of them), and there is none among them whose mediation of that knowledge is superior to all the rest.<sup>23</sup>

Sri Ramakrishna is a religious pluralist in Schmidt-Leukel's sense because he grants maximal salvific efficacy to multiple religious paths, including Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism.<sup>24</sup> As Schmidt-Leukel emphasizes, one need not affirm the equal salvific efficacy of *all* religions in order to be a religious pluralist.<sup>25</sup> Hence, the fact that Sri Ramakrishna deems *vāmācāra* and *hathayoga* to be inferior religious paths is perfectly consistent with his pluralist position, which only affirms that *more than one* religion has maximal salvific efficacy.<sup>26</sup> Moreover,

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23. Perry Schmidt-Leukel, "Exclusivism, Inclusivism, Pluralism: The Tripolar Typology—Clarified and Reaffirmed," in *The Myth of Religious Superiority*, ed. Paul Knitter (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005), 20.

24. Schmidt-Leukel's definition of religious exclusivism helps defend Sri Ramakrishna and other religious pluralists against the familiar charge that religious pluralism has the same logical structure as exclusivism. Merold Westphal, for instance, argues that religious pluralism is logically exclusivist because it presents itself "as the truth about religious differences and theo-logical exclusivism as a false account of them." "The Politics of Religious Pluralism," *Proceedings of the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy* 4 (1999), 4. For a similar objection, see Gavin D'Costa, "The Impossibility of a Pluralist View of Religions," *Religious Studies* 32 (1996), 225–26. However, from Schmidt-Leukel's standpoint, this charge of logical exclusivism has no force, since the religious pluralist rejects only *salvific* exclusivism and not *logical* exclusivism. Therefore, while religious pluralism *is* logically exclusivist, this fact in no way impugns the philosophical coherence of the religious pluralist position, at least as understood by Schmidt-Leukel and Sri Ramakrishna.

25. In fact, Schmidt-Leukel points out that Hick is a quintessential religious pluralist even though he denies salvific efficacy to violent religious sects ("Exclusivism, Inclusivism, Pluralism," 20 n. 31).

26. A referee questions my general project of interpreting Sri Ramakrishna's thought in terms of the standard threefold typology and asks, "Why not stay faithful to the native categories used by Ramakrishna, instead of imposing Western categories upon him?" In response to this query, I would make three points. First, I believe that bringing the threefold typology to bear on Sri Ramakrishna's teachings is not mutually exclusive with trying to stay faithful to Sri Ramakrishna's "native categories." That is, throughout section I, I do try to stay as faithful as possible to Sri Ramakrishna's "native categories" in my reconstruction of his views. However, I also argue that the threefold typology—particularly as formulated by Schmidt-Leukel—helps clarify Sri Ramakrishna's subtle position on religious diversity. My aim in using the threefold typology vis-à-vis Sri Ramakrishna is in the service of exegesis rather than eisegesis. Second, the threefold typology is quite helpful in distinguishing various competing perspectives on religious diversity. Although I do not have the space here to defend the cogency of the threefold typology, I would refer the reader to Schmidt-Leukel's article, "Exclusivism, Inclusivism,

since Sri Ramakrishna nowhere indicates that Hinduism's mediation of salvific knowledge of God is superior in any way to that of non-Hindu religions, he is clearly not a religious inclusivist in Schmidt-Leukel's sense. Sri Ramakrishna's model of religious pluralism, I suggest, is best understood not as a "Hindu" model but as a higher-order metatheory that affirms the salvific efficacy of all first-order religions. While Sri Ramakrishna was certainly a Hindu who held many traditional Hindu beliefs such as reincarnation, his teachings on religious pluralism are rooted not in a narrowly Hindu worldview but in the vast experiential standpoint of *vijñāna*, which encompasses all the world religions without being reducible to any one of them.

One of the distinguishing features of Sri Ramakrishna's religious pluralism is that it provides an ontological rationale for the *complementarity* of various religious conceptions of the Divine Reality. From Sri Ramakrishna's standpoint of *vijñāna*, each religion captures a real aspect of the infinite and illimitable God, so each religion makes a uniquely valuable contribution to our understanding of God and spiritual life. His point is not just that we should tolerate all religions and spiritual paths because they are all effective paths to realizing God. Rather, he is making the much more radical claim that we can—and should—*actively learn* from religions and philosophical worldviews other than our own, because they can give us insights into God and spiritual life that can enrich and broaden our own religious outlook and practice.<sup>27</sup> Accordingly, Sri Ramakrishna would frequently remind worshippers of the personal God that the impersonal aspect of God is also true.<sup>28</sup> Conversely, he would teach Advaitins that Śakti, the personal aspect of God, is as real as the impersonal Brahman.<sup>29</sup> From Sri Ramakrishna's perspective, the best way to overcome religious fanaticism and to enrich our understanding of God is to expose ourselves to religious standpoints other than our own.

Sri Ramakrishna illustrates the complementarity of different religious standpoints in his intriguing parable of the washerman:

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Pluralism," which not only makes a convincing case that the threefold typology is not fundamentally flawed but also defends the typology against numerous criticisms. Third, identifying Sri Ramakrishna's position as a form of religious pluralism facilitates cross-cultural dialogue by helping to locate his position vis-à-vis Western views on religious diversity. One of the reasons Sri Ramakrishna's religious pluralism has such profound contemporary relevance is that it belongs to the same family, as it were, as numerous Western theories of religious pluralism and hence can be brought into fruitful philosophical dialogue with these Western theories.

27. For a thorough discussion of this robustly pluralistic dimension of Sri Ramakrishna's views, see Long, "(Tentatively) Putting the Pieces Together."

28. See, for instance, Sri Ramakrishna's instruction to a Vaiṣṇava Goswami at *K* 152 / *G* 191.

29. See Sri Ramakrishna's response to Hāzrā at *K* 568 / *G* 550.

God assumes different forms and reveals Himself in different ways for the sake of His devotees. A man kept a solution of dye in a tub. Many people came to him to have their clothes dyed. He would ask a customer, "What color would you like to have your cloth dyed?" If the customer wanted red, then the man would dip the cloth in the tub and say, "Here is your cloth dyed red." If another customer wanted his cloth dyed yellow, the man would dip his cloth in the same tub and say, "Here is your cloth dyed yellow." If a customer wanted his cloth dyed blue, the man would dip it in the same tub and say, "Here is your cloth dyed blue." Thus he would dye the clothes of his customers different colors, dipping them all in the same solution. One of the customers watched all this with amazement. The man asked him, "Well? What color do you want for your cloth?" The customer said, "Brother, dye my cloth the color of the dye in your tub." (*K* 928 / *G* 858–59)

Like the parables of the chameleon and the blind men and the elephant, this parable teaches that God "assumes different forms and reveals Himself in different ways for the sake of His devotees." What is unique about the washerman parable is its emphasis on the value of learning from numerous religious standpoints. While most customers ask the washerman to dye their cloth in the color they prefer, one customer watches these other customers "with amazement," noticing that the tub contains an apparently magical universal dye that is all colors at once. Strikingly, instead of echoing other customers in asking for his cloth to be dyed in a particular color, this unusual customer asks for his cloth to be dyed in the universal color of the tub dye itself. At one level, of course, this unusual customer represents the *vijñānī* who revels in numerous forms and aspects of the Infinite God. At another level, however, this unique customer represents the ideally broad-minded spiritual aspirant who deepens and enriches her own conception of God by actively learning from a variety of religious standpoints. Instead of limiting God only to one particular aspect or form, this rare spiritual aspirant thinks of God as the Infinite Divine Reality that has innumerable forms and aspects.

In sum, Sri Ramakrishna's expansive ontology of God as the impersonal-personal Infinite Reality provides the foundation for a highly robust model of religious pluralism. On the basis of his own experience of *vijñāna*, he taught that every genuine religion captures some real aspect of the Infinite Reality and, hence, is an effective path to the goal of God-realization. Instead of stopping there, however, Sri Ramakrishna further affirmed the *harmony* of all religions: since the various religious conceptions of the ultimate reality are complementary rather than conflicting, all religious practitioners can enrich and broaden their understanding of God by learning about other religions.



## II. Sri Ramakrishna's Response to the Problem of Conflicting Religious Truth-Claims

As Hick and others have pointed out, the greatest challenge to any theory of religious pluralism is the fact that the truth-claims of different religions often conflict with one another. For instance, Christianity maintains that Christ died on the cross, while Islam denies this. Hinduism and Buddhism accept the doctrine of reincarnation, while Abrahamic religions—at least in their orthodox forms—do not. Hinduism accepts multiple divine incarnations such as Rāma and Kṛṣṇa, while Christianity accepts Christ as the sole incarnation of God and Islam denies the very possibility of a divine incarnation.

Regarding such historical and metaphysical issues, some religions are surely right while other religions are surely wrong. If Christ did in fact die on the cross, then Christianity is right on this issue, while Islam is wrong. If souls do reincarnate, then Hinduism and Buddhism are right, while orthodox Semitic religions are wrong. In light of the mutual incompatibility of numerous religious truth-claims, is religious pluralism even a coherent possibility? Clearly, any theory of religious pluralism that straightforwardly affirms the truth of all the historical and metaphysical doctrines of the various religions *would* be incoherent, since it would be committed to the contradictory assertions that Christ did and did not die on the cross, that reincarnation is and is not true, and so on.

Sri Ramakrishna, I will argue, is not committed to such an incoherent position, since his model of religious pluralism affirms the *salvific efficacy* of all religions without maintaining that all the *doctrines* of the various religions are true.<sup>30</sup> In order to reconstruct Sri Ramakrishna's nuanced response to the problem of conflicting religious truth-claims, I will employ Hick's helpful classification of three fundamental types of conflicting religious truth-claims.<sup>31</sup> First, there are disagreements about past historical events "that are in principle accessible to human observation."<sup>32</sup> Second, there are disagreements about "transhistorical" matters—such as reincarnation and the possibility of God incarnating as a human being—which cannot be verified "by historical or other empirical evidence."<sup>33</sup>

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30. Both Paul Griffiths and Robert McKim make a similar distinction between a religious pluralism defined in terms of "truth" and a religious pluralism defined in terms of "salvation." See Paul J. Griffiths, *Problems of Religious Diversity* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001), xiv, and Robert McKim, *On Religious Diversity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 7–8.

31. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 362–63. For a helpful discussion of three different ways that religious truth-claims can come into conflict, see Griffiths, *Problems of Religious Diversity*, 32–35.

32. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 363.

33. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 365. A bit later, Hick clarifies that while he is aware that numerous people in Asia have claimed that there *is* a good deal of empirical evidence in favor of



Third, there are disagreements about “ultimate questions,” such as the nature of the ultimate reality.<sup>34</sup>

We can reconstruct Sri Ramakrishna’s stance on these different types of conflicting truth-claims by examining his relevant teachings and his responses to questions posed by visitors.<sup>35</sup> A prominent example of the first type of conflicting truth-claim is the disagreement among different Hindu sects about whether the divine play (*līlā*) between Kṛṣṇa and the *gopīs*—his group of female consorts headed by Rādhā—was an actual historical event. While the Vaiṣṇava sect takes Kṛṣṇa’s *gopī-līlā* to be a true historical event, other Hindu sects take the *gopī-līlā* to be mythical rather than historical.

During Sri Ramakrishna’s time, the Brāhmo Samāj held that God is personal but formless (*nirākāra*) and, hence, that God cannot incarnate as a human being such as Kṛṣṇa. Sri Ramakrishna was well aware of the Brāhmo Samāj’s skepticism toward Kṛṣṇa and his *gopī-līlā*. While on a boat with followers of the Brāhmo Samāj, Sri Ramakrishna—with tears in his eyes—sang an ecstatic devotional song conveying Rādhā’s love for her beloved Kṛṣṇa and then told them: “Whether or not you accept the Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa *līlā*, you should accept their attraction [*tān*] for each other. Try to create that same yearning in your heart for God. God can be realized when this yearning [*vyākulatā*] is present” (*K* 90 / *G* 140). This remark about Kṛṣṇa’s *gopī-līlā* exemplifies Sri Ramakrishna’s subtle stance on conflicting religious truth-claims about historical events in general. Instead of urging the Brāhmo followers to accept the historical reality of Kṛṣṇa’s *gopī-līlā*, Sri Ramakrishna encourages them to try to emulate Rādhā’s extraordinary yearning (*vyākulatā*) for God, even if they do not take Rādhā or Kṛṣṇa to be real historical personages. While acknowledging that Brāhmos and Vaiṣṇavas hold conflicting views on the historical reality of Kṛṣṇa’s *gopī-līlā*, Sri Ramakrishna insists that

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reincarnation, he does not believe that any such empirical evidence is sufficiently strong at this point in time to convince a skeptic about reincarnation. As Hick puts it, “We shall always hope for new evidence or new arguments which will make the truth plain to all; but in the meantime we should regard the matter as one about which it would be unwise to be unyieldingly dogmatic” (*An Interpretation of Religion*, 369).

34. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 363.

35. Freda Matchett and Nalini Devdas claim that Sri Ramakrishna never intended his teachings on religious pluralism to be taken as a means of resolving conflicting religious truth-claims. As Matchett puts it, “It is . . . unlikely that Ramakrishna ever intended ‘*Jata mat tato path*’ [“As many faiths, so many paths”] to be taken as a solemn pronouncement about the truth-claims of the world’s great religions.” “The Teaching of Rāmakrishna in Relation to the Hindu Tradition and as Interpreted by Vivekānanda,” *Religion* 11 (1981), 179. For a similar claim, see Nalini Devdas, *Sri Ramakrishna* (Bangalore: Christian Institute for the Study of Science and Religion, 1966), 107. In contrast to Matchett and Devdas, I argue in section II that Sri Ramakrishna explicitly addresses the problem of conflicting religious truth-claims at various points in the *Kathāmṛta*.

the Brāhmos can nonetheless learn a valuable spiritual lesson from the Vaiṣṇava doctrine.

Evidently, Sri Ramakrishna felt that belief in the historical reality of Kṛṣṇa's *gopī-līlā* is not soteriologically vital. Hence, even if the *gopī-līlā* did take place in the historical past and the followers of the Brāhmo Samāj would then be mistaken in their rejection of the historical reality of the *gopī-līlā*, Sri Ramakrishna insists that this mistake would not diminish the salvific efficacy of the path adopted by the Brāhmos. Conversely, even if Vaiṣṇavas are mistaken in taking the *gopī-līlā* to be an actual historical reality, the Vaiṣṇava devotional faith and practice would not thereby be invalidated, since the Vaiṣṇavas would still be able to realize God by trying to cultivate the yearning for God exemplified in Rādhā's love for Kṛṣṇa.

Sri Ramakrishna seems to hold a similar stance on conflicting truth-claims about transhistorical matters. Although he himself believes in the traditional Hindu doctrine of reincarnation, he maintains that belief in reincarnation is not soteriologically vital. When asked whether he believes in reincarnation, he replies: “Yes, they say there is something like that. How can we understand the ways of God through our small intellects? Many people have spoken about reincarnation; therefore I cannot disbelieve it” (*K* 105 / *G* 153). In fact, at numerous points in the *Kathāmrta*, Sri Ramakrishna appeals to the doctrine of reincarnation to explain spiritual truths and to resolve doubts in the minds of some of his visitors.<sup>36</sup> For instance, he remarks, “As long as you do not feel that God is the Master, you must come back to the world, you must be born again and again. There will be no rebirth when you can truly say, ‘O God, Thou art the Master’” (*K* 291 / *G* 308).<sup>37</sup>

The following exchange between Sri Ramakrishna and a Vaiṣṇava devotee reveals Sri Ramakrishna's subtle stance on reincarnation:

VAIṢṆAVA: “Sir, is a man born again?”

MASTER: “It is said in the *Gītā* that a man is reborn with those tendencies that are in his mind at the time of his death. King Bharata thought of his deer at the time of death and was reborn as a deer.”

VAIṢṆAVA: “I could believe in rebirth only if an eye-witness told me about it.”

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36. See, for instance, Sri Ramakrishna's appeal to the doctrine of reincarnation in his remark about the devotee Pūrṇa in the entry from 15 July 1885 (*K* 871 / *G* 812–13) and in his remark about Ajāmila from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* in the entry from 11 March 1883 (*K* 150–51 / *G* 190).

37. See also Sri Ramakrishna's references to reincarnation in the entries from 19 September 1884, 11 March 1886, and 14 December 1882.

MASTER: "I don't know about that, my dear sir. I cannot cure my own illness, and you ask me to tell you what happens after death! What you are talking about only shows your petty mind. Try to cultivate love of God. You are born as a human being only to attain divine love. You have come to the orchard to eat mangoes; what need is there of knowing how many thousands of branches and millions of leaves there are in the orchard? To bother about what happens after death! How silly!" (K 907 / G 841)

Knowing that his visitor is a Vaiṣṇava, Sri Ramakrishna responds to his query about reincarnation by appealing to the *Bhagavad Gītā*, a scripture typically revered by Vaiṣṇavas. However, the Vaiṣṇava visitor is not satisfied with Sri Ramakrishna's appeal to scriptural authority and demands empirical proof of reincarnation. Noticing his visitor's skeptical attitude, Sri Ramakrishna quickly changes tack and tells him to "cultivate love of God" instead of indulging in fruitless speculation about "what happens after death." Sri Ramakrishna responds to his householder disciple Mahendranath Gupta's query in a similar manner:

M. [GUPTA]: "I haven't much faith in rebirth and inherited tendencies. Will that in any way injure my devotion to God?"

MASTER: "It is enough to believe that all is possible in God's creation. Never allow the thought to cross your mind that your ideas are the only true ones, and that those of others are false. Then God will explain everything." (K 232 / G 259)

Sri Ramakrishna reassures Gupta that his skepticism about reincarnation will not injure his devotion to God, but he also warns him against becoming fanatical about his own "ideas." Sri Ramakrishna's overall position seems to be that while he personally believes in reincarnation and frequently appeals to the doctrine of reincarnation in his teachings on spiritual life, he never tries to compel skeptics to accept reincarnation and even reassures them that their lack of belief in reincarnation will not hinder their spiritual progress so long as they are sincere and humble.

Sri Ramakrishna adopts a similar stance on the transhistorical question of whether it is possible for God to incarnate as a human being. It is clear that he unambiguously accepts the *avatāra* doctrine. He remarks, for instance:

God has different forms, and He sports in different ways. He sports as *īśvara* [Lord], *deva* [minor deity], man, and the universe. In every age He descends to earth in human form as an Incarnation, to teach people love and devotion. There is the instance of Caitanya. One can taste devotion and love of God only through His Incarnations. Infinite are the ways of

God’s play, but what I need is love and devotion. I want only the milk. The milk comes through the udder of the cow. The Incarnation is the udder.  
(*K* 228 / *G* 257)

Evidently, he upholds the traditional Hindu view—adumbrated in 4.7 of the *Gītā*—that God incarnates as a human being in every age.<sup>38</sup> According to Sri Ramakrishna, ordinary people can learn to cultivate *bhakti* by witnessing the ideal *bhakti* of *avatāras* (“Incarnations”) such as Caitanya. Sri Ramakrishna also teaches that devotion toward an *avatāra* is sufficient for spiritual liberation. As Sri Ramakrishna puts it, the *avatāra* holds “in His hand the key to others’ liberation” (*K* 204 / *G* 237). At another point in the *Kathāmṛta*, Sri Ramakrishna remarks: “To love an *avatāra*—that is enough. Ah, what ecstatic love the *gopīs* had for Kṛṣṇa!” (*K* 347 / *G* 356).

On the other hand, Sri Ramakrishna points out that there are many spiritual aspirants who do not accept the *avatāra* doctrine, such as Advaita Vedāntins and those like Kabīr and followers of the Brāhmo Samāj: “[Advaita] Vedānta does not recognize the Incarnation of God. According to it, Caitanyadeva is only a bubble of the non-dual Brahman. . . . The Incarnation of God is accepted by those who follow the path of *bhakti*” (*K* 292 / *G* 308).<sup>39</sup> Are Advaitins and Brāhmos soteriologically handicapped because they reject the *avatāra* doctrine? Sri Ramakrishna answers with an emphatic “No”:

The sum and substance of the whole matter is that a man must love God, must be restless [*vyākul*] for Him. It doesn’t matter whether you believe in God with form or in God without form. You may or may not believe that God incarnates as a human being. But you will realize God if you have that yearning [*anurāg*]. Then God Himself will let you know what He is like.  
(*K* 450 / *G* 449)

Evidently, Sri Ramakrishna places much greater emphasis on *vyākulatā*, intense restlessness for God, than on doctrinal religious beliefs, such as belief in the *avatāra* doctrine. From Sri Ramakrishna’s standpoint, while religions frequently conflict on points of doctrine, they all agree on the importance of *vyākulatā*. In theistic religions, this *vyākulatā* amounts to an intense love of God and an

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38. As Angelika Malinar points out, while the word *avatāra* is not used either in 4.7 or anywhere else in the *Gītā*, 4.7 can nonetheless be “seen as foreshadowing fully elaborated *avatāra* doctrines.” *The Bhagavadgītā: Doctrines and Contexts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 99.

39. See also Sri Ramakrishna’s reference to Kabīr’s disparagement of Kṛṣṇa at *K* 345 / *G* 354.

all-consuming desire to realize God directly. In Advaita Vedānta, *vyākulatā* takes the form of *mumukṣutva*, the intense longing for spiritual liberation. In Buddhism, *vyākulatā* appears in the form of *sammā saṅkappa* (“right resolve”) and *sammā vāyāma* (“right effort”)—the second and sixth components of the Noble Eightfold Path—which amount to an intense desire to achieve liberation from suffering through the attainment of *nibbāna*. In sum, although Sri Ramakrishna himself clearly accepted the *avatāra* doctrine and recognized that belief in an *avatāra* is soteriologically vital in certain devotional traditions such as Vaiṣṇavism and Christianity, he nonetheless insisted that belief in the *avatāra* doctrine is not universally necessary for God-realization.

We are now in a position to summarize Sri Ramakrishna’s general stance on conflicting religious truth-claims about historical and transhistorical matters. According to Sri Ramakrishna, religions make conflicting claims about both historical and transhistorical matters, and some religions are correct about such matters while others are mistaken. However, he emphasizes that none of these historical and transhistorical matters are soteriologically vital, so even if some religions hold erroneous views on these matters, these errors do not substantially handicap these religions as effective paths to God-realization. Moreover, he points out that every religion has errors, so it is foolhardy to claim that one religion is superior to all the others:

Ah, that restlessness [*vyākulatā*] is the whole thing. Whatever path you follow—whether you are a Hindu, a Muslim, a Christian, a Śākta, a Vaiṣṇava, or a Brāhmo—the vital point is restlessness. God is our Inner Guide [*Antaryāmi*]. It doesn’t matter if you take a wrong path—only you must be restless for Him. God Himself will put you on the right path. Besides, there are errors in all paths. Everyone thinks his watch is right; but as a matter of fact no watch is absolutely right. But that doesn’t hamper one’s work. If a man is restless for God he gains the company of *sādhus* and as far as possible corrects his own watch with the *sādhū*’s help. (K 1123 / G 673)

Sri Ramakrishna likens religious fanatics to people who think that their watch alone tells the correct time. According to Sri Ramakrishna, however, “no watch is absolutely right.” That is, all religions have errors, but these errors do not diminish the soteriological efficacy of these religions as paths to God-realization. The essential attitude needed to make spiritual progress in any religion is “restlessness” for God (*vyākulatā*). If a religious practitioner has this *vyākulatā*, then even if he or she makes a mistake, God Himself will put the religious practitioner “on the right path.”

Sri Ramakrishna illustrates this rather novel idea by means of an analogy:

All doctrines are only so many paths; but a path is by no means God Himself. Indeed, one can reach God if one follows any of the paths with wholehearted devotion. Suppose there are errors in the religion that one has accepted; if one is sincere and earnest, then God Himself will correct those errors. Suppose a man has set out with a sincere desire to visit Jagannāth at Puri and by mistake has gone north instead of south; then certainly someone meeting him on the way will tell him: "My good fellow, don't go that way. Go to the south." And the man will reach Jagannāth sooner or later. If there are errors in other religions, that is none of our business. God, to whom the world belongs, takes care of that. Our duty is somehow to visit Jagannāth. (*K* 577 / *G* 559)

A man going on a pilgrimage to visit the Jagannāth Temple in Puri might start out in the wrong direction, but he will eventually be guided in the right direction by a more experienced traveler. Similarly, if one sincerely aspires to realize God through a particular religion, the errors in that religion will not hinder one's spiritual progress. Indeed, one may eventually recognize them to be errors and modify one's religious beliefs and practices accordingly. Moreover, Sri Ramakrishna adds that we should devote our full energy to practicing our own religion sincerely and wholeheartedly rather than wasting our time pointing out "errors in other religions." In short, regarding religious disagreements about historical and transhistorical matters, Sri Ramakrishna maintains that some religions are correct while others are incorrect, but he hastens to add that all religions have errors and that these errors do not detract from their salvific efficacy.

Regarding apparently conflicting truth-claims about the nature of the ultimate reality, Sri Ramakrishna's approach is quite different. As we have seen in section I, his unique experience of *vijñāna* revealed to him that all religious conceptions of God are true, since they all capture real aspects of one and the same impersonal-personal Infinite Reality. While different religious conceptions of the ultimate reality *seem* to conflict, they are in fact complementary. Theistic religions refer to the personal aspect of God under different names and forms, while nontheistic religions like Buddhism and Advaita Vedānta refer to the impersonal aspect of God as "*nibbāna*" or "Brahman." While Islam and Judaism emphasize the formless aspect of God, Christians and Hindu Vaiṣṇavas emphasize God's capacity to incarnate as a human being. Since Sri Ramakrishna's conception of the Infinite God is based on his direct spiritual experience of *vijñāna* rather than on logical reasoning, it would be beside the point to fault him for failing to provide a rational explanation of how God can have apparently contradictory attributes—such as personality and impersonality—at the same time. For

Sri Ramakrishna, what might appear to be contradictions to the rational intellect are reconciled on the lofty heights of suprarational spiritual experience.<sup>40</sup>

Therefore, Sri Ramakrishna maintains that all religious conceptions of the ultimate reality are true, even though none of them captures the *whole* of the Infinite Reality. Moreover, even if a particular religious conception of God is partial or one-sided, it can nonetheless serve as a salvifically effective path to God-realization. It is worth noting that Sri Ramakrishna's position on this issue does not commit him to religious relativism, since he explicitly acknowledges that some religions might have more sophisticated conceptions of God than others:

It is enough to have yearning for God. It is enough to love Him and feel attracted to Him: Don't you know that God is the Inner Guide? He sees the longing of our heart and the yearning of our soul. Suppose a man has several sons. The older boys address him distinctly as "Bābā" or "Pāpā," but the babies can at best call him "Bā" or "Pā." Now, will the father be angry with those who address him in this indistinct way? The father knows that they too are calling him, only they cannot pronounce his name well. All children are the same to the father. Likewise, the devotees call on God alone, though by different names. They call on one Person only. God is one, but His names are many. (*K* 60 / *G* 112)

Taken out of context, Sri Ramakrishna's final statement that "God is one, but His names are many" could be taken to mean that religions differ only in the various "names" they ascribe to God. However, the context of this statement makes clear that his position is more nuanced. Just as babies refer to their father as "Bā" or "Pā" while the older boys refer to him as "Bābā" or "Pāpā," some religions may have less sophisticated conceptions of God than other religions. Significantly, however, Sri Ramakrishna warns against wasting our time trying to determine which religion is the most sophisticated in this regard. Rather, he insists that just as the father loves all his children equally, God loves equally the practitioners of all religions, in spite of their varying degrees of sophistication. Moreover, a given religion's doctrinal sophistication does not track its salvific efficacy. Hence, religions that are less sophisticated than others at the level of doctrine may nonetheless be as salvifically effective as more doctrinally sophisticated religions.

From Sri Ramakrishna's perspective, the sheer diversity of religious truth-claims about historical and transhistorical matters as well as about the ultimate reality, far from undermining the possibility of religious pluralism, provides the *basis* for a robust religious pluralism. As he puts it, "God has made

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40. For a detailed elaboration of this claim, see my discussion of VV2 in section III of chapter 1.



different religions to suit different aspirants, times, and countries" (*K* 577 / *G* 559). In other words, various religions—with their differing, and often conflicting, truth-claims—appeal to people of varying temperaments and cultures, but all religions are effective paths to the common goal of God-realization. If one finds the truth-claims of a particular religion especially convincing or appealing, then one can realize God by practicing that religion, but one should never assume that other religions are not salvifically effective paths because their truth-claims differ from the truth-claims of one's own religion.

### III. Addressing Major Objections to Sri Ramakrishna's Religious Pluralism

We are now in a position to consider some of the most serious objections to Sri Ramakrishna's model of religious pluralism. Scholars such as Morales and Prothero question Sri Ramakrishna's assumption that all religions are paths to the same goal.<sup>41</sup> Morales argues, for instance, that the various religious conceptions of the Absolute are mutually exclusive, so the respective goals of all religions must also be mutually exclusive:

There are several radically distinct, and wholly irreconcilable, religiously inspired ideas about what constitutes the Absolute. Consequently, rather than attempting to artificially claim that there is only one mountain top toward which all religions aspire, it would be more truthful, and more in keeping with what the various religious traditions themselves actually say, to state that there are several different mountains—each representing a radically different idea of what is the Absolute. There is a Nirvana mountain, a Brahman mountain, an Allah mountain, a Jain mountain. Some mountains are monotheistic, some are polytheistic, henotheistic, pantheistic or panentheistic. Moreover, it is incumbent upon us all individually to choose for ourselves which of these many possibly correct Absolute-mountains we wish to scale. Only one of these mutually exclusive philosophical mountains, however, can be the correct one.<sup>42</sup>

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41. See Morales, "Radical Universalism," 28–29; Prothero, *God Is Not One*, 99 and 194. For a similar criticism, see J. N. Mohanty, "Yato Mat Tato Path," in *Sri Ramakrishna's Ideas and Our Times: A Retrospect on His 175th Birth Anniversary* (Kolkata: Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 2013), 121–26.

42. Morales, "Radical Universalism," 28.



According to Morales, different religious conceptions of the Absolute are “wholly irreconcilable,” so it is simply false to claim that all religions aspire toward “only one mountain top.” Moreover, Morales insists that only one of these “mutually exclusive” conceptions of the Absolute “can be the correct one.” In other words, Morales defends the exclusivist view that only one religion among all the world religions is true and, therefore, salvifically effective. First of all, it is worth noting that Sri Ramakrishna himself anticipated Morales’s objection in his parables of the chameleon and of the blind men and the elephant. From Sri Ramakrishna’s standpoint, religious exclusivists are like people quarreling foolishly over the color of the chameleon or like blind men insisting that the part of the elephant they are touching is the *whole* of the elephant. Sri Ramakrishna was not so naive or idealistic as to deny that many religious practitioners hold exclusivist beliefs. Rather, on the basis of the spiritual experience of *vijñāna* and his own practice of Hindu and non-Hindu faiths, he taught that the various religious conceptions of the ultimate reality are not, in fact, mutually exclusive since they correspond to *different aspects* of one and the same Infinite Reality.

Tellingly, Morales nowhere addresses Sri Ramakrishna’s teachings on *vijñāna* or his parables illustrating religious pluralism, which convey a very broad understanding of God as the impersonal-personal Infinite Reality. As a result, Morales overlooks the nuances of Sri Ramakrishna’s religious pluralism, which is far less hegemonic than Morales alleges. While Sri Ramakrishna maintains that all religions share the common goal of God-realization, his conception of God-realization is extraordinarily capacious. Indeed, his parables of the chameleon and the elephant suggest a very broad soteriological outlook: people of various temperaments can realize God in a variety of ways, since the Infinite God has numerous forms and aspects, all of which are real. Although different people see the chameleon in *different colors*, they all see one and the same chameleon. Likewise, all the blind men touch *different parts* of one and the same elephant. According to Sri Ramakrishna, the goal of the Advaitic *jñānayogī* is to realize *nirguṇa* Brahman, “the Infinite, without form or shape and beyond mind and words” (*K* 181 / *G* 218). Sri Ramakrishna insists, however, that the *bhakta* who worships the personal God can realize the same Infinite Reality as “eternally endowed with form and personality” (*nitya sākāra*) (*K* 152 / *G* 191).<sup>43</sup> Elsewhere, Sri Ramakrishna points out that for *bhaktas*, God-realization amounts to the *jīva*’s realization of its eternal relationship with the eternal personal God: “It can’t be said that *bhaktas* need *nirvāṇa*. According to some schools there is an eternal Kṛṣṇa and there are also His eternal devotees. Kṛṣṇa is Spirit embodied,

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43. It is worth noting that Sri Ramakrishna’s statement about the *bhakta*’s realization of the “*nitya sākāra*” form of God suggests that Advaitic *nirvikalpa samādhi* is not necessary for spiritual salvation.

and His Abode also is Spirit embodied. Kṛṣṇa is eternal and the devotees also are eternal" (*K* 834 / *G* 779). From Sri Ramakrishna's standpoint of *viññāna*, both the Advaitin and the *bhakta* attain the goal of God-realization, even though they end up realizing different aspects or forms of one and the same Infinite Reality. Since Morales ignores entirely the ontological framework of *viññāna* within which Sri Ramakrishna's teachings on religious pluralism are embedded, he makes sweeping generalizations about Sri Ramakrishna's views on the world religions that fail to do justice to their subtlety and sophistication.

Some scholars, including Ninian Smart and R. W. Neufeldt, claim that Buddhism in particular poses a serious problem for a Vedāntic model of religious pluralism such as Sri Ramakrishna's.<sup>44</sup> Although Smart lodges this objection against Swami Vivekananda's "Neo-Advaitic" harmonizing of religions, his objection is broad enough to apply to Sri Ramakrishna's religious pluralism as well. According to Smart, "the ultimate reality is presented in a substantialist way in Neo-Advaita: this does not seem to square with Theravādin *nirvāṇa* or with Mahāyāna *śūnyatā* (though the latter sometimes functions a bit like a ghost-substance)."<sup>45</sup> Smart rightly notes that a Vedāntic model of religious pluralism such as Sri Ramakrishna's presupposes a "substantialist" understanding of the ultimate reality as a positive entity or reality, whether that positive reality is conceived as a personal God (by theists) or as the impersonal Brahman (by Advaita Vedāntins).<sup>46</sup> According to Smart, however, since the Theravāda and Mahāyāna strains of Buddhism do not subscribe to a substantialist view of the ultimate reality, these Buddhist schools cannot easily be accommodated within a Vedāntic model of religious pluralism.

The best way to begin to address Smart's objection is to consider Sri Ramakrishna's own statements about the Buddha. Regarding the Buddha, Sri Ramakrishna observes:

He was not an atheist. He simply could not express the Reality in words. Do you know what "Buddha" means? By meditating on one's own *bodha svarūpa* [one's true nature as Pure Consciousness], one *becomes* that *bodha*

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44. See R. W. Neufeldt, "The Response of the Ramakrishna Mission," in *Modern Indian Responses to Religious Pluralism*, ed. Harold Coward (Albany: SUNY Press, 1987), 73; Ninian Smart, "Models for Understanding the Relations between Religions," in *Ninian Smart on World Religions*, vol. 2, ed. John J. Shepherd (Surrey: Ashgate, 2009), 268; Ninian Smart, "A Contemplation of Absolutes," in *Ninian Smart on World Religions*, vol. 2, ed. Shepherd, 257.

45. Smart, "Models for Understanding the Relations between Religions," 268.

46. In his use of the term "substantialist," Smart does not mean to imply that the ultimate reality is conceived as a substance. I take it that Smart uses the term "substantialist" in a very broad sense to denote any conception of the ultimate reality as a positive entity or reality.

*svarūpa*. . . . Why should Buddha be called an atheist? When one realizes one's *svarūpa* [the true nature of one's Self], one attains a state that is something between *asti* [is] and *nāsti* [is-not]. (*K* 1028 / *G* 947–48)

Sri Ramakrishna explains the Buddha's enlightenment in Advaitic terms as the realization of his own true Self, which is of the nature of Pure Consciousness (*bodha*). Of course, Sri Ramakrishna was aware that the Buddha himself did not explain his enlightenment experience as the realization of the Supreme Ātman. Nonetheless, Sri Ramakrishna implies that what the Buddha called "*nibbāna*" is a negative term denoting the realization of the ineffable Ātman.<sup>47</sup>

From Smart's perspective, Sri Ramakrishna unjustifiably Vedāntizes Buddhism by interpreting the Buddha's enlightenment experience in substantialist terms as the realization of his "*svarūpa*." According to Smart, the Theravāda and Mahāyāna schools of Buddhism deny such a substantialist understanding of the Buddha's enlightenment. Hence, it seems as if Sri Ramakrishna is only able to accommodate Buddhism within his religious pluralist framework by assimilating Buddhism to Advaita Vedānta. While Smart is correct that most Theravādins do take the Buddha to have denied the reality of the Vedāntic Ātman, there is lively scholarly controversy regarding whether the Buddha himself denied the reality of the Vedāntic Ātman. Numerous scholars have argued that the Buddha's teaching of *anattā* ("nonself"; Sanskrit, *anātman*) was meant to deny the reality of the empirical-personal self rather than of the impersonal Vedāntic Ātman.<sup>48</sup> As Kamaleswar Bhattacharya puts it, "the Buddha does not deny the Upaniṣadic *ātman*; on the contrary, he indirectly affirms it, *in denying that which is falsely believed to be the ātman*."<sup>49</sup> These scholars find support

47. See Sri Ramakrishna's similar remark about the Buddha at *K* 430 / *G* 430.

48. See C. A. F. Rhys Davids, *Outlines of Buddhism* (London: Methuen, 1934); Ananda Coomaraswamy, *Buddha and the Gospel of Buddhism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 199–221; Kamaleswar Bhattacharya, *L'ātman-brahman dans le bouddhisme ancien* (Paris: École française d'Extrême-Orient, 1973); Georg Grimm, *The Doctrine of the Buddha* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1958); Hajime Nakamura, *Indian Buddhism* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987), 64; J. G. Jennings, *The Vedāntic Buddhism of the Buddha* (London: Oxford University Press, 1948); David and Nancy Reigle, "*Ātman/Anātman* in Buddhism and Its Implication for the Wisdom Tradition," in David and Nancy Reigle, *Studies in the Wisdom Tradition* (Eastern School Press, 2015), 1–28; Edward Conze, *Buddhist Thought in India* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1962), 129–34; Miri Albahari, "Against No-*Ātman* Theories of *Anattā*," *Asian Philosophy* 12.1 (2002), 5–20; David Reigle, "The Ātman-Brahman in Ancient Buddhism," in Kamaleswar Bhattacharya, *The Ātman-Brahman in Ancient Buddhism* (Cotopaxi, CO: Canon Publications, 2015), ix–xviii; Perry Schmidt-Leukel, *Understanding Buddhism* (Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2007); Rose Drew, *Buddhist and Christian? An Exploration of Dual Belonging* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 57–61.

49. Bhattacharya, *L'ātman-brahman dans le bouddhisme ancien*, 1.

for their interpretation of the Buddha's teachings in numerous passages from the Pāli *Tipiṭaka*.<sup>50</sup> For instance, in the *Samyutta Nikāya*, Vacchagotta asks the Buddha, "Is there a self?" and the Buddha remains silent, and Vacchagotta then asks the Buddha, "Then is there no self?" and the Buddha remains silent again.<sup>51</sup> The Buddha's telling silence on the question of whether a self exists could easily be taken to support Sri Ramakrishna's position that the Buddha realized his true essence as Pure Consciousness but "could not express the Reality in words." Moreover, in a well-known passage from the *Khuddaka Nikāya*, the Buddha seems to describe *nibbāna* as an ineffable transempirical Reality: "Monks, there is a not-born, a not-become, a not-made, a not-compounded. Monks, if that unborn, not-become, not-made, not-compounded were not, there would be apparent no escape from this here that is born, become, made, compounded."<sup>52</sup> According to Schmidt-Leukel, "[t]his passage does not only emphasise that 'there is' a transcendent reality. It also underlines its genuine transcendence in the most explicit way by distinguishing it ontologically from the major features of the saṃsāric world."<sup>53</sup> Such passages from the *Tipiṭaka* arguably lend support to Sri Ramakrishna's substantialist interpretation of the Buddha's enlightenment experience.

Moreover, Smart's assumption that Mahāyāna Buddhism interprets the Buddha's *anattā* doctrine in nonsubstantialist terms is also a highly tendentious one, since there are numerous interpretations of the Mahāyāna school, some of which are substantialist and others which are nonsubstantialist. In his classic study, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism* (1955), T. R. V. Murti argues that Nāgārjuna's *śūnyatā* denotes a positive ineffable Reality that can neither be said to exist nor not to exist.<sup>54</sup> In support of his interpretation, Murti cites a striking passage from the Mahāyāna text, *Ratna-Kūṭa-Sūtra*: " 'that ātman is' is one end; 'that ātman is not' is another; but the middle between the ātma and nairātmya views is the Inexpressible. . . . It is the reflective review of things."<sup>55</sup> This passage

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50. While we should reject the facile assumption that the teachings contained in the *Tipiṭaka* coincide exactly with the historical Buddha's teachings, I believe that the *Tipiṭaka* is nonetheless a valuable—though fallible—textual source that gives at least some insight into what the historical Buddha *might* have taught.

51. *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Samyutta Nikāya*, trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 1393–94.

52. *The Minor Anthologies of the Pali Canon*, trans. Frank Woodward (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), 97–98.

53. Schmidt-Leukel, *Understanding Buddhism*, 72.

54. T. R. V. Murti, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism: A Study of the Mādhyamika System* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1955), 329–31.

55. Cited in Murti, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*, 27–28.

could easily be taken to support Sri Ramakrishna's view that the Buddha realized the ineffable Reality that is "between *asti* and *nāsti*." More recently, David Reigle has argued that major Mahāyāna thinkers such as Nāgārjuna, Vasubandhu, and Candrakīrti "thought that the Buddha's *anātman* teaching was directed against a permanent personal *ātman*" rather than against the Upaniṣadic Ātman.<sup>56</sup> Reigle further suggests that the "Buddha Nature" (*buddha-dhātu*) mentioned in the Mahāyāna *Tathāgatagarbhasūtras* bears a strong resemblance to the Vedāntic Ātman.<sup>57</sup>

Obviously, this is not the place to defend a Vedāntic or quasi-Vedāntic interpretation of Buddhism. For present purposes, I hope to have established that the Vedāntic interpretation of the Buddha's teachings favored by Sri Ramakrishna continues to be supported by a number of scholars and is, hence, not wildly implausible or flagrantly eisegetic. Therefore, while Smart is correct that a Vedāntic model of religious pluralism such as Sri Ramakrishna's cannot accommodate the nonsubstantialist understanding of the *anattā* doctrine championed by certain Buddhist schools such as Theravāda, this fact does not have the damaging consequences that Smart seems to think it does. Sri Ramakrishna does not so much "Vedāntize" Buddhism as endorse a substantialist interpretation of Buddhism that arguably finds support in numerous passages from the Pāli *Tipiṭaka* and certain Mahāyāna texts. Since both substantialist and nonsubstantialist interpretations of Buddhism are controversial, Sri Ramakrishna is perfectly entitled to take a stand on this issue and interpret Buddhism in substantialist terms.

In an interesting essay on religious pluralism in the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna and the Swamis of the Ramakrishna Mission, R. W. Neufeldt argues that Sri Ramakrishna's views on the world religions are more inclusivist than pluralist because they presuppose *vijñāna* as the highest truth. According to Neufeldt, Sri Ramakrishna insists that all religions must accept the standpoint of *vijñāna*, the "belief-cum-experience that all is God."<sup>58</sup> All religions, as Neufeldt puts it, "must be informed by the belief that God is all, or all is God and must end in the direct vision or experience of this belief."<sup>59</sup>

However, Neufeldt misunderstands how the standpoint of *vijñāna* informs Sri Ramakrishna's teachings on religious pluralism. As a *vijñānī*, Sri Ramakrishna realized that God is both *nirguṇa* and *saguṇa* and hence that all genuine religions and spiritual philosophies capture different aspects of one and the same

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56. Reigle, "The Ātman-Brahman in Ancient Buddhism," ix.

57. Reigle, "The Ātman-Brahman in Ancient Buddhism," xvi–xvii.

58. Neufeldt, "The Response of the Ramakrishna Mission," 73.

59. Neufeldt, "The Response of the Ramakrishna Mission," 72. For a similar claim, see Devdas, *Sri Ramakrishna*, 113–14.

Infinite Reality. The spiritual standpoint of *vijñāna* provided Sri Ramakrishna with a capacious philosophical framework for explaining how all religions are effective paths to the common goal of God-realization. Instead of taking *vijñāna* as the philosophical framework underlying Sri Ramakrishna's religious pluralism, Neufeldt makes the unjustified assumption that Sri Ramakrishna injects the "belief-cum-experience" of *vijñāna* into the *doctrinal content* of all religions.

As a result, Neufeldt's interpretation of Sri Ramakrishna suffers from three major flaws. First of all, no passages in the *Kathāmṛta* support Neufeldt's view that Sri Ramakrishna imposed the *vijñāna* doctrine that "God is all" on all the world religions. In fact, Sri Ramakrishna taught that various religions hold *different* views on the nature of God, since God Himself is infinite and illimitable. Second, Neufeldt is mistaken in assuming that Sri Ramakrishna takes the spiritual experience of *vijñāna* to be the salvific goal of all religions. As I have argued in section I, Sri Ramakrishna's understanding of the common goal of God-realization is maximally capacious: far from claiming that all religions must lead to the experience of *vijñāna*, Sri Ramakrishna claims that God can be realized in numerous ways and in any of His innumerable aspects. For instance, while the Advaitin realizes the *nirguṇa* aspect of God in *nirvikalpa samādhi*, *bhaktas* realize various forms of the *saguṇa* aspect of God. Third, Neufeldt overlooks the many passages in the *Kathāmṛta* where Sri Ramakrishna indicates that the vast majority of people cannot attain the realization of *vijñāna*, since this rarefied experience is reserved only for "*īśvarakoṭis*," a spiritual elite consisting of *avatāras* and their inner circle. Hence, it would be wrong to attribute to Sri Ramakrishna the view that such a rarefied state of *vijñāna* is the salvific goal of all religions. Contrary to Neufeldt, then, the standpoint of *vijñāna* allows Sri Ramakrishna to leave intact the respective doctrinal beliefs and salvific goals of the various religions.

Finally, I wish to consider the possible objection that there is a performative contradiction between Sri Ramakrishna's religious pluralism and his attempt to impose his pluralist views on others. This objection misses the mark because Sri Ramakrishna never tried to compel anyone to accept his own doctrine of religious pluralism. Addressing religious exclusivists, he remarks:

What I mean is that dogmatism is not good. It is not good to feel that my religion alone is true and other religions are false. The correct attitude is this: My religion is right, but I do not know whether other religions are right or wrong, true or false. (*K* 576–77 / *G* 558)

Since Sri Ramakrishna recognizes that exclusivistically inclined religious practitioners would likely be unsympathetic to a pluralist standpoint, he takes a different tack by providing an *internal* critique of the exclusivist standpoint itself: he



argues that it is unreasonable for exclusivists to assume that all religions other than their own are not salvifically efficacious. One can only be in a position to judge the salvific efficacy of a religion after understanding it thoroughly and sincerely practicing it. Hence, the exclusivist's a priori rejection of the salvific efficacy of all other religions amounts to sheer "dogmatism." Sri Ramakrishna encourages exclusivists to repudiate their dogmatism and to adopt instead the "correct attitude" of humility and agnosticism by suspending judgment about whether other religions are salvifically efficacious.

As we have seen, however, Sri Ramakrishna himself *did* practice religions other than his own—including Christianity and Islam—and found them to be as salvifically efficacious as Hinduism. As he puts it, "I had to practice every religion [*sab dharma*] for a time—Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, as well as the paths of Śāktism, Vaiṣṇavism, and [Advaita] Vedānta. I realized that there is only one God [*ek īśvar*] toward whom all are travelling; but the paths are different" (*K* 77 / *G* 129). On the basis of his own direct spiritual experience of the "one God" through the practice of Hindu, Christian, and Islamic religious paths, Sri Ramakrishna felt justified in going beyond a position of mere agnosticism about other religions to the full-blown pluralist view that all genuine religions are different salvifically efficacious paths to God. Crucially, however, instead of trying to impose his own pluralist view on those who are inclined to religious exclusivism, Sri Ramakrishna urges exclusivists to be agnostic about whether other religions are as salvifically effective as their own.

Sri Ramakrishna's teachings on the harmony of religions remain as timely as ever. Almost daily, we hear of atrocities committed in the name of religion in various parts of the world. In such a contemporary climate, it is imperative that we work collectively toward developing a strong philosophical foundation for interreligious dialogue and understanding. While the recent burgeoning of interest in religious pluralism among theologians and philosophers of religion is undoubtedly a promising development, the vast majority of pluralist theories remain rooted in Christian theological paradigms. What is urgently needed now is a broader cross-cultural approach to religious pluralism that takes seriously the pluralist views developed in *both* Western and non-Western religious traditions. The next chapter contributes to this global endeavor by bringing Sri Ramakrishna into conversation with Hick, one of the most prominent and influential Western theorists of religious pluralism.

## 4

## JOHN HICK'S VEDĀNTIC ROAD NOT TAKEN?

HICK'S EVOLVING VIEWS ON RELIGIOUS  
PLURALISM IN THE LIGHT  
OF SRI RAMAKRISHNA

The renowned British philosopher John Hick (1922–2012) was a pioneer in his efforts to develop a rigorous and plausible theory of religious pluralism. Hick's pluralist theory is based on the conviction that all the major world religions are salvifically efficacious, since they are all equally capable of effecting the “transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to Reality-centredness.”<sup>1</sup> Hick also acknowledges, however, that the conceptions of the ultimate reality found in the various world religions are often mutually contradictory. Hick's innovative quasi-Kantian strategy for addressing this problem is well known: he posits an unknowable “Real *an sich*” and distinguishes it from the “Real as humanly-thought-and-experienced.”<sup>2</sup> According to Hick, the conceptions of the ultimate reality found in all the great world religions are different culturally conditioned ways of conceiving one and the same noumenal Real.<sup>3</sup>

Hick first presented this quasi-Kantian theory of religious pluralism in a 1976 conference paper and elaborated it in numerous subsequent works.<sup>4</sup> It is not widely known that between 1970 and 1974, the early Hick championed a substantially different theory of religious pluralism based not on Kant but on the twentieth-century Indian mystic Sri Aurobindo (1872–1950), who was himself profoundly

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1. John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (London: Macmillan, 1989), 14.

2. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 239–40.

3. See Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 246 and *passim*.

4. Hick's conference paper “Mystical Experience as Cognition” (1976) was later published in *Understanding Mysticism*, ed. Richard Woods (Garden City: Doubleday, 1980), 415–21.



influenced by Sri Ramakrishna. In several early works, Hick refers approvingly to Sri Aurobindo's "logic of the infinite," according to which the Infinite Reality has numerous attributes and aspects—such as personality and impersonality, form and formlessness, immanence and transcendence—which appear contradictory to the finite human intellect. The early Hick derived a theory of religious pluralism from this Aurobindonian premise: since each religion captures at least one real "aspect" of the Infinite Reality, the various conceptions of the Divine taught by the great world religions are complementary rather than conflicting.<sup>5</sup>

Building on the previous chapter, I will argue that we can gain fresh insight into Hick's early and late views on religious pluralism by examining them in the light of Sri Ramakrishna. Section I provides the background necessary to understand the somewhat veiled Vedāntic underpinnings of Hick's early theory of religious pluralism. Sri Aurobindo's subtle account of the "logic of the infinite" in *The Life Divine* (1940), I suggest, has to be understood within the broader context of his lifelong effort to reinterpret the "original Vedānta" of the Upaniṣads and the *Bhagavad Gītā* in the nonsectarian spirit of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda.<sup>6</sup> As we will see, Sri Aurobindo's Vedāntic logic of the infinite is heavily indebted to Sri Ramakrishna's teachings on divine infinitude. Following Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Aurobindo appeals to the suprarational logic of the infinite in order to harmonize various apparently conflicting conceptions of the Infinite Reality.

Section II then examines Hick's early theory of religious pluralism, clarifying both its ontological basis in Sri Aurobindo's logic of the infinite and its broader affinities with the modern tradition of nonsectarian Vedānta inaugurated by Sri Ramakrishna. Hick indicates that his understanding of Sri Aurobindo's logic of the infinite derives primarily from Jehangir Chubb's article "Presuppositions of Religious Dialogue" (1972), which critically examines different models for reconciling personal and nonpersonal conceptions of the Divine Reality. Interestingly, Chubb contrasts Sri Aurobindo's logic of the infinite—the model Chubb favors—with a Kantian pluralist model that conceives the ultimate reality as the ineffable "thing-in-itself."<sup>7</sup> Hick, in this early phase of his thinking, followed Chubb in favoring Sri Aurobindo's logic of the infinite to a Kantian pluralist model.

By 1976, however, Hick abandoned the Vedāntic logic of the infinite in favor of a quasi-Kantian pluralist model remarkably akin to—and perhaps even

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5. John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths* (Oxford: One World, 1973), 139.

6. Sri Aurobindo, *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, vols. 21–22: *The Life Divine* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, [1940] 2005), 16.

7. J. N. Chubb, "Presuppositions of Religious Dialogue," *Religious Studies* 8 (1972), 295.

inspired by—the Kantian model sketched in Chubb's article. Section III outlines the main features of Hick's quasi-Kantian theory of religious pluralism and highlights some of its fundamental differences from his earlier Aurobindonian theory. At an ontological level, while the early Hick subscribes to the nonsectarian Vedāntic view that the Infinite Reality is *both* personal *and* nonpersonal, the later Hick adopts the quasi-Kantian position that the ineffable Real *an sich* is *neither* personal *nor* impersonal. Not surprisingly, the theory of religious pluralism Hick derives from this quasi-Kantian ontology differs substantially from his earlier Aurobindonian theory. According to the later Hick, the “divine *personae* and *impersonae*” of all the world religions are phenomenally true but noumenally false, and the religious practices based on these phenomenal conceptions of the Real are all equally capable of leading to salvific transformation.<sup>8</sup> By contrast, the early Hick maintains that all the world religions capture different *ontologically real* aspects of one and the same Infinite Reality. The early Hick thereby accounts for the salvific efficacy of all religions without appealing to a Kantian noumenal-phenomenal ontology.

Section IV critically examines the later Hick's quasi-Kantian pluralist model in the light of Sri Ramakrishna. Drawing on chapter 3, I argue that while there are numerous similarities between Sri Ramakrishna's *vijñāna*-based religious pluralism and Hick's quasi-Kantian pluralism, there are also substantial differences at the level of ontology. Numerous scholars have complained that Hick's quasi-Kantian model is insufficiently pluralistic, since it fails to take at face value many of the central truth-claims of the world religions. Sri Ramakrishna's pluralist model, I contend, is not only immune to many of the most serious objections critics have leveled against Hick's quasi-Kantian model but also has numerous philosophical advantages of its own. On this basis, I make the case that Sri Ramakrishna's *vijñāna*-based religious pluralism is more robust and philosophically cogent than Hick's quasi-Kantian pluralism and, hence, deserves a prominent place in contemporary philosophical and theological discourse. Finally, section V lays some of the groundwork for future cross-cultural work on religious pluralism by outlining four criteria for assessing the relative adequacy of different pluralist theories.

## 1. Sri Ramakrishna's Legacy: Sri Aurobindo's “Logic of the Infinite” in the Context of Nonsectarian Vedānta

In chapter 1, I argued that Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy of Vijñāna Vedānta bears much stronger affinities with the nonsectarian Vedāntic philosophy of

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8. See Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 246 and *passim*.

the Upaniṣads and the *Bhagavad Gītā* than with the narrower sectarian views of later Vedāntic philosophers such as Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja. Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), inspired by his guru Sri Ramakrishna, interpreted Vedānta as a non-sectarian philosophy that harmonizes various apparently conflicting religious faiths, sectarian philosophies, and spiritual practices. Just as Sri Ramakrishna claimed that the “Vedas teach that God is both with and without form, both personal and impersonal” (*K* 152 / *G* 191), Vivekananda declared that “our religion preaches an Impersonal Personal God.”<sup>9</sup> Vivekananda also echoed Sri Ramakrishna in affirming the harmony of all religious and spiritual paths from the standpoint of Vedānta:

The grandest idea in the religion of the Vedanta is that we may reach the same goal by different paths; and these paths I have generalised into four, viz those of work, love, psychology, and knowledge. . . . We have found that, in the end, all these four paths converge and become one. All religions and all methods of work and worship lead us to one and the same goal.<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, Vivekananda was one of the first to emphasize the pluralistic implications of scriptural passages such as Ṛg Veda I.164 (“That which exists is One; sages call it by various names”)<sup>11</sup> and *Bhagavad Gītā* 4.11 (“Whosoever wants to reach me through whatsoever ways, I reach him through that”).<sup>12</sup>

Sri Aurobindo, in turn, was strongly influenced by the life and teachings of both Sri Ramakrishna and Vivekananda.<sup>13</sup> Sri Aurobindo claimed that between 1908 and 1912, he received three messages on a mystical plane from Sri Ramakrishna, who had of course passed away decades earlier.<sup>14</sup> Sri Ramakrishna’s profound influence on Sri Aurobindo’s spiritual development is evident from the latter’s statement to a disciple: “Remember also that we derive from Ramakrishna. For myself it was Ramakrishna who personally came and first turned me to this Yoga.”<sup>15</sup> In May 1908, Sri Aurobindo was incarcerated for a year in Kolkata’s

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9. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, vol. 3, 249.

10. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, vol. 1, 108.

11. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, vol. 1, 349.

12. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, vol. 1, 475.

13. For details, see Ayon Maharaj, “Toward a New Hermeneutics of the *Bhagavad Gītā*: Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Aurobindo, and the Secret of *Vijñāna*,” *Philosophy East and West* 65.4 (2015), 1214.

14. Sri Aurobindo, *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, vols. 10–11: *Record of Yoga* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, 2001), 128.

15. Sri Aurobindo, *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, vol. 36: *Autobiographical Notes and Other Writings of Historical Interest* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, 2006), 179 (letter dated 1913).

Alipore jail for his political activities, and he claimed that Vivekananda, who had of course passed away in 1902, mystically communicated to him various instructions in meditation during that time: “Vivekananda in the Alipore jail gave me the foundations of that knowledge which is the basis of our Sadhana [spiritual practice].”<sup>16</sup>

Sri Aurobindo spent the rest of his life engaging in intense spiritual practice and writing dense treatises on spiritual philosophy and the Indian scriptures. He wrote full-scale commentaries on the Vedas, the Īśā and Kena Upaniṣads, and the *Bhagavad Gītā* in the nonsectarian spirit of Sri Ramakrishna and Vivekananda.<sup>17</sup> For instance, in his commentary on the Īśā Upaniṣad, Sri Aurobindo echoes Sri Ramakrishna's teaching on the inseparability of the static Brahman and the dynamic Śakti: “The Inactive and the Active Brahman are simply two aspects of the one Self, the one Brahman, who is the Lord.”<sup>18</sup> Similarly, in his commentary on the *Gītā*, Sri Aurobindo follows Sri Ramakrishna in interpreting the term *viññāna* in numerous verses of the *Gītā* as the “integral” knowledge that God is the “supreme Soul that is at once impersonality and divine Person and much more than either.”<sup>19</sup>

In *The Life Divine* (1940), Sri Aurobindo repeatedly contrasts Advaita Vedānta—which maintains that the ultimate reality is only impersonal—with the “ancient Vedānta” of the Upaniṣads, which holds that the Infinite Divine Reality is both personal and impersonal.<sup>20</sup> In book II, Chapter 2 of *The Life Divine*—a chapter cited by the early Hick—Sri Aurobindo clarifies the ontological foundation of Upaniṣadic Vedānta in terms of what he calls the “logic of the infinite.” Sri Ramakrishna's influence on Sri Aurobindo is especially prominent in this chapter of *The Life Divine*. Sri Aurobindo not only draws heavily on Sri Ramakrishna's teachings on divine infinitude but also alludes to several of Sri Ramakrishna's favorite parables and analogies.<sup>21</sup> In an almost verbatim echo

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16. Aurobindo, *Autobiographical Notes*, 179.

17. See Sri Aurobindo's books, *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, vol. 15: *The Secret of the Veda* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, [1920] 1998); *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, vol. 19: *Essays on the Gita* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, [1920] 1997); *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, vol. 17: *The Upanishads—I: Isha Upanisad* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, [1915] 2003), 3–94; *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, vol. 18: *The Upanishads—II: Kena and Other Upanishads* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 2001).

18. Aurobindo, *Isha Upanisad*, 88.

19. Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita*, 399. For a detailed discussion of Sri Aurobindo's interpretation of the *Gītā* in the context of Sri Ramakrishna's doctrine of *viññāna*, see Maharaj, “Toward a New Hermeneutics of the *Bhagavad Gītā*.”

20. Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, 63.

21. See, for instance, Sri Aurobindo's references to the parable of the blind men and the elephant and the parable of the elephant-driver in *The Life Divine* (345–46).

of Sri Ramakrishna's teaching that "no one can place a limit to God by saying, 'God is this, and no more'" (*K* 99 / *G* 148), Sri Aurobindo observes that since the "supreme Reality" is "absolute and infinite," "we cannot limit it by saying it is not this, it is not that."<sup>22</sup> Moreover, Sri Aurobindo illustrates the "logic of the Infinite"<sup>23</sup> by appealing to the parable of the blind men and elephant—a favorite of Sri Ramakrishna's—and draws the conclusion that "[i]t will not do to apply our limited and limiting conclusions to That which is illimitable."<sup>24</sup> Developing Sri Ramakrishna's teaching that "everything is possible for God" (*K* 997 / *G* 920), Sri Aurobindo claims that the "Infinite is illimitably free, free to determine itself infinitely, free from all restraining effect of its own creations."<sup>25</sup>

According to Sri Aurobindo, the finite "mental reason" cannot help but see a contradiction between immanence and transcendence, form and formlessness, personality and impersonality, stasis and dynamism.<sup>26</sup> However, according to the suprarational logic of the infinite, what appear to be contradictions to the finite rational mind prove to be complementary aspects of one and the same Infinite Reality. As we saw in chapter 1, Sri Ramakrishna frequently taught that "Brahman and Śakti are inseparable, like fire and its power to burn" (*K* 55 / *G* 108). Similarly, Sri Aurobindo declares that "the silence of the Spirit and the dynamis of the Spirit are complementary truths and inseparable."<sup>27</sup> Sri Aurobindo even borrows Sri Ramakrishna's favorite analogy to illustrate this spiritual truth: "As we cannot separate Fire and the power of Fire, it has been said, so we cannot separate the Divine Reality and its Consciousness-Force, Chit-Shakti."<sup>28</sup> Further, just as Sri Ramakrishna taught that God is both "with and without form" (*K* 997 / *G* 920), Sri Aurobindo maintains that the Divine Being "is at once Form and the Formless."<sup>29</sup> Echoing Sri Ramakrishna's teaching that God is both *saguṇa* and *nirguṇa* (*K* 246 / *G* 271), Sri Aurobindo asserts that "the Saguna Brahman active and possessed of qualities" and "the Nirguna immobile and without qualities" are dual aspects of "the one Ishwara."<sup>30</sup>

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22. Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, 336.

23. Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, 343.

24. Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, 345.

25. Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, 348.

26. Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, 350–51.

27. Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, 351.

28. Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, 361–62.

29. Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, 352.

30. Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, 367.

For Sri Aurobindo, the most fundamental difference between the nonsectarian Vedānta of the Upaniṣads and the sectarian philosophy of Advaita Vedānta is that the former, but not the latter, is based on the logic of the infinite. Advaitic philosophy, in accordance with the dichotomizing tendency of the finite mind, accepts the reality only of the impersonal (*nirguṇa*) Brahman and denies the ultimate reality of the personal (*saguṇa*) God and the universe.<sup>31</sup> By contrast, the nonsectarian Vedānta of the Upaniṣads holds that the Infinite Reality is at once personal and impersonal, static and dynamic, with and without form, immanent and transcendent. Following Sri Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo affirms the harmony of all religions precisely on the basis of this nonsectarian Vedāntic worldview. All religions, Sri Aurobindo claims, “express one Truth in various ways and move by various paths to one goal.”<sup>32</sup>

Tellingly, Sri Aurobindo credits both Sri Ramakrishna and Vivekananda with inaugurating the nonsectarian interpretation of Vedānta he champions:

[T]he word Vedanta is usually identified with the strict Monism and the peculiar theory of Maya established by the lofty and ascetic intellect of Shankara. But it is the Upanishads themselves and not Shankara's writings, the text and not the commentary, that are the authoritative Scripture of the Vedantin. Shankara's, great and temporarily satisfying as it was, is still only one synthesis and interpretation of the Upanishads. There have been others in the past which have powerfully influenced the national mind and there is no reason why there should not be a yet more perfect synthesis in the future. It is such a synthesis, embracing all life and action in its scope, that the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna and Vivekananda have been preparing.<sup>33</sup>

Sri Aurobindo helpfully distinguishes three different meanings of the term “Vedānta.” First, “Vedānta,” in its original meaning, refers to the Upaniṣads or, more broadly, to the *prasthānatraya* (the “three pillars of Vedānta”)—namely, the Upaniṣads, the *Bhagavad Gītā*, and the *Brahmasūtra*. Second, “Vedānta” refers to the school of Indian philosophy which is based on the teachings of the Upaniṣads. It is not widely known that there are over thirty subschools of Vedāntic philosophy, including not only Śaṅkara's Advaita but also Rāmānuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita, Madhva's Dvaita as well as a variety of less well-known subschools

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31. Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, 242.

32. Aurobindo, *Isha Upanisad*, 43.

33. Sri Aurobindo, *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, vol. 13: *Essays in Philosophy and Yoga: Shorter Works, 1910–1950* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, 1998), 10–11.

such as Bhedābheda, Acintyabhedābheda, and Śuddhādvaita. Third, “Vedānta” may refer to a nonsectarian spiritual philosophy—rooted in the Upaniṣads and the *Gītā*—which harmonizes various spiritual paths and religious views. As we have seen, Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo, inspired by Sri Ramakrishna, often used the term “Vedānta” in this third sense.

In the remainder of this chapter, it is essential to bear in mind these three different senses of the term “Vedānta.” Sri Aurobindo specifically cautions against conflating Vedānta with Śaṅkara’s Advaita Vedānta—a mistake, as we will see, made both by the early Hick and by some of his critics. It is equally important to distinguish Advaita Vedānta from the nonsectarian Vedāntic worldview of Sri Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, and Sri Aurobindo.

## II. The Early Hick’s Aurobindonian Model of Religious Pluralism

Hick indicates in his autobiography that he was aware of Sri Ramakrishna as early as 1970. During his first stay in India in 1970, Hick delivered a lecture at the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture (Kolkata) in which he referred to the “poverty and simplicity of Ramakrishna.”<sup>34</sup> Moreover, in several of his books, Hick mentions that many Hindus consider Sri Ramakrishna to be an incarnation of God.<sup>35</sup> Surprisingly, however, Hick—as far as I am aware—never refers to Sri Ramakrishna’s teachings on the harmony of religions or his eclectic religious practices. Hick also does not refer to Vivekananda in any of his works, although it is possible that Hick was aware of some of Vivekananda’s ideas.<sup>36</sup> Hick’s knowledge of Sri Aurobindo was comparatively richer than his knowledge of Sri Ramakrishna and Vivekananda. In his autobiography, Hick notes that he studied Sri Aurobindo’s work in the late 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>37</sup> He also visited the Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry and had extended conversations with

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34. John Hick, *An Autobiography* (Oxford: One World, 2002), 200.

35. John Hick, *God Has Many Names* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980), 121; John Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions: The Rainbow of Faiths* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 89.

36. Ankur Barua notes that Hick “often quoted Radhakrishnan’s translations from the Hindu scriptures in support of his own claims about divine ineffability, transformative experience and religious pluralism.” “Hick and Radhakrishnan on Religious Diversity: Back to the Kantian Noumenon,” *Sophia* 54.2 (June 2015), 181. Some of the similarities I note in this section between the views of Hick and Vivekananda may be due to the fact that Hick read the work of Radhakrishnan, who was heavily influenced by Vivekananda’s ideas.

37. Hick, *An Autobiography*, 193.



numerous scholars of Sri Aurobindo, including Jehangir Chubb and Santosh Sengupta.<sup>38</sup>

The early Hick, then, was definitely influenced by Sri Aurobindo's concept of the "logic of the infinite" and also had cursory knowledge of the saintly life of Sri Ramakrishna. Significantly, however, nothing Hick wrote at the time indicates any awareness of the broader nonsectarian Vedāntic philosophy of Sri Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, and Sri Aurobindo or their teachings on religious pluralism, which were based on that philosophy. Nonetheless, I will argue that in work published between 1970 and 1974, Hick championed a theory of religious pluralism that bears striking affinities with the pluralist doctrine of nonsectarian Vedānta.<sup>39</sup>

In the final chapter of *Arguments for the Existence of God* (1971), Hick raises the problem of "conflicting religious beliefs," especially the problem of conflicting experiences of—and claims about—the nature of the ultimate reality. As Hick puts it, "By no means all religious experience is theistic; ultimate reality is apprehended as non-personal and as multi-personal as well as unipersonal."<sup>40</sup> In a few tantalizing sentences at the end of the chapter, Hick hints at a theory of religious pluralism that could resolve this problem of conflicting claims about the ultimate reality:

[T]he different forms of religious experience, giving rise to the different religions of the world, are properly to be understood as experiences of different aspects of one immensely complex and rich divine reality. If this is so, the beliefs of the different religions will be related to a larger truth as the experiences which gave rise to those beliefs are related to a larger reality. . . . [W]e are led to postulate a divine reality of which the different religions of the world represent different partial experiences and partial

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38. Hick, *An Autobiography*, 193 and 197–98.

39. Hick presents his early theory of religious pluralism primarily in the following four works: *Arguments for the Existence of God* (London: Macmillan, 1970), 117–20; *God and the Universe of Faiths*, 120–47; *Philosophy of Religion*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1973), 119–29; "The Outcome: Dialogue into Truth," in *Truth and Dialogue in World Religions*, ed. John Hick (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), 140–55. Understandably, Hick's early pluralist theory has not received nearly as much attention as his later quasi-Kantian theory. As far as I am aware, Paul Eddy is the only scholar who discusses in detail Hick's early views on religious pluralism. See Eddy's book *John Hick's Pluralist Philosophy of World Religions* (London: Ashgate, 2002), 61–90. While Eddy briefly acknowledges the influence of Sri Aurobindo's logic of the infinite on Hick's early thought (*John Hick's Pluralist Philosophy*, 80–81), I think Eddy overlooks the substantial ontological differences between the early Hick's Aurobindonian pluralist model and the later Hick's quasi-Kantian model.

40. Hick, *Arguments for the Existence of God*, 117.



knowledge. This latter possibility remains, however, to be adequately developed and examined.<sup>41</sup>

Although Hick does not refer to Vedāntic thinkers anywhere in the book, his early sketch of a pluralist theory resonates strongly with nonsectarian Vedānta. As we saw in the previous chapter, Sri Ramakrishna claims that all religions capture different real aspects of one and the same Infinite Divine Reality. Similarly, Hick claims that the various world religions are based on “experiences of different aspects of one immensely complex and rich divine reality.” Moreover, just as Sri Ramakrishna likens different religions to blind men touching different parts of the same elephant, Hick claims that all religions “represent different partial experiences and partial knowledge” of the same divine reality.

Hick further developed this early model of religious pluralism in the ninth chapter of the second edition of *Philosophy of Religion* (1973) and in his essay “The Outcome: Dialogue into Truth” (1974). In both of these works, Hick claims that Sri Aurobindo’s “logic of the infinite” provides a promising philosophical basis for reconciling personal and nonpersonal conceptions of the ultimate reality. In *Philosophy of Religion*, Hick appeals to Sri Aurobindo in order to justify his claim that apparently conflicting religious conceptions of the Divine Reality are actually complementary:

For if, as every profound form of theism has affirmed, God is infinite and therefore exceeds the scope of our finite human categories, he may be both personal Lord and non-personal Ground of Being; both judge and father, source alike of justice and of love. At any rate, there is a program for thought in the exploration of what Aurobindo called “the logic of the infinite” and the question of the extent to which predicates that are incompatible when attributed to a finite reality may no longer be incompatible when referred to infinite reality.<sup>42</sup>

The early Hick’s philosophical strategy for reconciling conflicting religious truth-claims is explicitly Aurobindonian: the “infinite reality” can be both “personal Lord” and “non-personal Ground of Being,” even though the finite mind cannot grasp how this is possible. In *The Life Divine*, we should recall, Sri Aurobindo derives this “logic of the infinite” from the “ancient Vedānta” of the Upaniṣads and contrasts it with the sectarian philosophy of Advaita Vedānta, which maintains that the ultimate reality is only impersonal (*nirguṇa*). While the

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41. Hick, *Arguments for the Existence of God*, 119–20.

42. Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*, 2nd ed., 128.

early Hick may have read parts of *The Life Divine*, he did not seem to have a clear understanding of the nonsectarian Vedāntic context of Sri Aurobindo's "logic of the infinite," which I outlined in the previous section. This fact helps explain Hick's somewhat puzzling remark that "there is a program for thought in the exploration of what Aurobindo called 'the logic of the infinite.'" Apparently unbeknownst to Hick, the nonsectarian Vedāntins Sri Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, and Sri Aurobindo had already explored in detail the far-reaching implications of the logic of the infinite for religious pluralism.

One year later, in "The Outcome: Dialogue into Truth," Hick repeats almost verbatim his earlier Aurobindonian argument from *Philosophy of Religion* and then adds: "This possibility is discussed by Jehangir Chubb in his paper, 'Presuppositions of Inter-Faith [*sic*] Dialogue,' in which he speaks of Sri Aurobindo's 'logic of the Infinite,' in which different phenomenological characteristics are not mutually exclusive."<sup>43</sup> This statement suggests that Hick's understanding of Sri Aurobindo's logic of the infinite likely derived not from *The Life Divine* but from Chubb's article, which discusses Sri Aurobindo's logic of the infinite in isolation from its nonsectarian Vedāntic context. In his autobiography, Hick notes that he had extended discussions with Chubb—a retired philosophy professor at Bombay University who specialized in the thought of Sri Aurobindo—in both London and India in 1970.<sup>44</sup>

Chubb's "Presuppositions of Religious Dialogue" (1972), which Hick read carefully, is a sophisticated article that critically evaluates various models for reconciling personal and nonpersonal conceptions of the Divine Reality.<sup>45</sup> It is worth examining Chubb's article in some detail, since it sheds valuable light on Hick's early theory of religious pluralism and its relation to his later quasi-Kantian theory. The first model Chubb considers is the Advaitic "doctrine of the two truths," according to which the nontheistic conception of *nirguṇa* Brahman "gives the full truth," while theistic conceptions of *saguṇa* Brahman are "the lesser truth."<sup>46</sup> Chubb rejects this "two truths" model as "only a half-hearted attempt at reconciliation," since it relegates theistic religions to an inferior position.<sup>47</sup>

Chubb next considers the view "that the Ultimate is ineffable and hence cannot be described but only somehow indicated."<sup>48</sup> Interestingly, Chubb argues that

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43. Hick, "The Outcome: Dialogue into Truth," 153.

44. Hick, *An Autobiography*, 193.

45. Chubb, "Presuppositions of Religious Dialogue," 289–310.

46. Chubb, "Presuppositions of Religious Dialogue," 295.

47. Chubb, "Presuppositions of Religious Dialogue," 295.

48. Chubb, "Presuppositions of Religious Dialogue," 295.

this view, rather than the “two truths” view which is often thought to be Advaitic, is Śāṅkara’s “real position.”<sup>49</sup> However, Chubb rejects this model as well, since it “does not affirm the equal truth of seemingly incompatible doctrines but treats all positive affirmations not as containing descriptions but as constituting sign posts pointing to the indescribable.”<sup>50</sup> Strikingly, Chubb likens this view of the radical ineffability of the Ultimate to “Kant’s concept of the thing-in-itself.”<sup>51</sup> According to Chubb, this Śāṅkaran view also suffers from the same philosophical problems as the Kantian theory, which fixes a “great gulf . . . between reality and concepts.”<sup>52</sup> As Chubb puts it, “it is difficult to see in what sense a concept is more or less adequate or more or less true if its truth is not in some clear sense reaffirmed at the absolute level.”<sup>53</sup> In other words, it is impossible to affirm the full-blown *truth* of various religious conceptions of the Ultimate, since there is no way to determine whether they correspond to any aspects of the ineffable Ultimate itself.

Chubb’s fascinating discussion of this Kantian-Śāṅkaran view of the ineffable Ultimate is significant for at least two reasons. First of all, this view bears a suspicious resemblance to the later Hick’s quasi-Kantian model of religious pluralism.<sup>54</sup> It is even possible that Chubb’s 1972 article first alerted Hick to the possibility of developing a model of religious pluralism along Kantian lines. Second, Chubb anticipated one of the major objections repeatedly leveled against Hick’s later quasi-Kantian model of religious pluralism. Just as Chubb complains that this Kantian-Śāṅkaran model fixes a “great gulf” between “reality and concepts,” many critics have objected—as we will see in section IV—that Hick’s quasi-Kantian model sets up an ontological gulf between the strictly unknowable Real *an sich* and phenomenal conceptions of the Real *an sich*, thereby denying ontological reality to the personal and nonpersonal ultimates of the various world religions.

Chubb goes on to argue that Sri Aurobindo’s “logic of the infinite” provides the best “method of reconciling apparently opposite predicates affirmed of God or the ultimate.”<sup>55</sup> According to Chubb, the “logic of exclusive affirmation,” which

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49. Chubb, “Presuppositions of Religious Dialogue,” 295. I think Chubb is mistaken in ascribing this view to Śāṅkara. I outline my own interpretation of Śāṅkara’s Advaitic position in note 53 of chapter 1.

50. Chubb, “Presuppositions of Religious Dialogue,” 295.

51. Chubb, “Presuppositions of Religious Dialogue,” 295.

52. Chubb, “Presuppositions of Religious Dialogue,” 295.

53. Chubb, “Presuppositions of Religious Dialogue,” 295.

54. Eddy also notes, in passing, the similarity between Chubb’s Kantian model and Hick’s later Kantian model of religious pluralism (*John Hick’s Pluralist Philosophy*, 93).

55. Chubb, “Presuppositions of Religious Dialogue,” 296.

is appropriate to “finite existence,” does not apply to the Infinite Divine Reality.<sup>56</sup> Hence, it would be inappropriate to impose the limitations of thought onto the Infinite Reality: “The capacity to accommodate a predicate only through the exclusion of another predicate belonging to the same universe of discourse is the mark of finite existence. The finite lives by exclusion. The infinite, however, suffers from no such limitation. . . . Thus there is no contradiction in saying that God is both personal and impersonal.”<sup>57</sup> From Chubb's Aurobindonian standpoint, since the finite intellect cannot help but think in terms of the law of contradiction, it inevitably finds the divine attributes of personality and impersonality to be contradictory. However, according to the “logic of the infinite,” apparently contradictory attributes can coexist in the Infinite Divine Reality, which is not bound by the law of contradiction.

The early Hick's approving reference to Chubb's article in his 1974 essay suggests that he considered the various models discussed by Chubb and consciously rejected the Kantian-Śāṅkaran model of harmonizing religious truth-claims in favor of Chubb's Aurobindonian “logic of the infinite.” This is a highly significant fact, since it suggests that Hick's early position on religious pluralism should be viewed not as a half-articulate groping toward his later quasi-Kantian theory but as a carefully considered position in its own right that was based on the *principled rejection* of the very quasi-Kantian theory he would later adopt.

*God and the Universe of Faiths* (1973) contains the early Hick's fullest elaboration of a theory of religious pluralism on the basis of an Aurobindonian logic of the infinite. In this book, Hick calls for a “Copernican revolution” in theology and argues that past efforts to harmonize the world religions have usually been “Ptolemaic,” since they place a particular religion at the theological center.<sup>58</sup> Hick argues that both Karl Rahner's doctrine of anonymous Christianity and Hans Küng's distinction between “ordinary” and “extraordinary” ways of salvation remain trapped in a Ptolemaic Christian framework.<sup>59</sup> Hick also adds that “contemporary philosophical Hinduism”—by which he means Advaita Vedānta—is equally Ptolemaic, since it “holds that the ultimate reality, Brahman, is beyond all qualities, including personality, and that personal deities . . . are partial images of the Absolute created for the benefit of that majority of mankind who cannot rise above anthropomorphic thinking to the pure Absolute.”<sup>60</sup> Even at this early stage, Hick correctly recognizes that Advaita Vedānta is Ptolemaic in that

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56. Chubb, “Presuppositions of Religious Dialogue,” 296.

57. Chubb, “Presuppositions of Religious Dialogue,” 296.

58. Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, 131.

59. Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, 127–28.

60. Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, 131.

it grants ultimate reality only to *nirguṇa* Brahman, while granting merely provisional or empirical reality to *saṁguṇa* Brahman (“personal deities”).

Tellingly, however, the early Hick mistakenly calls this Ptolemaic view “vedantic,” even though Advaita Vedānta is only one subschool of Vedānta.<sup>61</sup> The early Hick’s mistaken conflation of “contemporary philosophical Hinduism” with Advaita Vedānta is extremely puzzling for three reasons. First, Hick claimed to have studied some of Sri Aurobindo’s work and even cited a chapter from Sri Aurobindo’s *Life Divine*, but he did not seem to be aware that Sri Aurobindo repeatedly *contrasts* his own nonsectarian Vedāntic philosophy—rooted in the Upaniṣads—with the sectarian philosophy of Advaita Vedānta.<sup>62</sup> Second, Hick had carefully read Chubb’s article, which explicitly contrasts Śaṅkara’s model of the ultimate reality with Sri Aurobindo’s logic of the infinite. Third, Hick organized a conference on the philosophy of religion at the University of Birmingham in April 1970, where Santosh Sengupta presented a paper with the striking title “The Misunderstanding of Hinduism.” Since Hick himself edited the volume *Truth and Dialogue* (1974) containing the papers presented at this conference, Hick had almost certainly read Sengupta’s paper. Ironically, the target of Sengupta’s vigorous polemic is precisely the misunderstanding of both Hinduism and Vedānta exhibited by Hick himself. Sengupta attacks the “standard western description of Hinduism,” which “interpret[s] the whole of Hindu thought in the light” of one particular system—namely, “Advaita-Vedānta (pure monism) as expounded by Śa[ṅ]kara.”<sup>63</sup> Sengupta not only points out that there are numerous theistic schools of Vedānta that differ substantially from Advaita Vedānta but also explicitly mentions that Sri Aurobindo, in *The Life Divine*, rejects the Advaitic doctrine of “Māyāvāda”—the doctrine of the unreality of the universe—in favor of the Upaniṣadic view that the world is “an expression or manifestation of the supreme reality.”<sup>64</sup>

Mysteriously, in spite of the early Hick’s professed familiarity with Sri Aurobindo’s work and his knowledge of the articles of Chubb and Sengupta, he made the mistake of conflating both Vedānta in general and “contemporary philosophical Hinduism” with Advaita Vedānta.<sup>65</sup> Hick’s equation of Vedānta with

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61. Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, 131.

62. See, for instance, Sri Aurobindo’s remarks in *The Life Divine* (661–64) and in *Essays on the Gita* (447–49).

63. Santosh Chandra Sengupta, “The Misunderstanding of Hinduism,” in *Truth and Dialogue in World Religions*, ed. Hick, 97.

64. Sengupta, “The Misunderstanding of Hinduism,” 103.

65. In *An Interpretation of Religion* (253), Hick notes that Vedānta encompasses not only Advaita but also Viśiṣṭādvaita and Dvaita. However, even in this later phase of his thinking,

Advaita Vedānta had serious consequences, since it prevented him from recognizing the nonsectarian Vedāntic underpinnings of his own “Copernican” theory of religious pluralism, which he presented in the tenth chapter of *God and the Universe of Faiths*. The key premise of the early Hick’s pluralist theory is the positive infinitude of God:

Let us begin with the recognition, which is made in all the main religious traditions, that the ultimate divine reality is infinite and as such transcends the grasp of the human mind. God, to use our christian term, is infinite. . . . We cannot draw boundaries round his nature and say that he is this and no more. If we could fully define God, describing his inner being and his outer limits, this would not be God.

From this it follows that the different encounters with the transcendent within the different religious traditions may all be encounters with the one infinite reality, though with partially different and overlapping aspects of that reality. . . . May it not be that the different concepts of God, as Jahweh, Allah, Krishna, Param Atma, Holy Trinity, and so on . . . are all images of the divine, each expressing some aspect or range of aspects and yet none by itself fully and exhaustively corresponding to the infinite nature of the ultimate reality?<sup>66</sup>

Although Hick does not explicitly mention Sri Aurobindo in this passage, he is clearly indebted to Sri Aurobindo’s “logic of the infinite,” which was fresh in his mind and to which he explicitly referred in other texts written at the time. Following Sri Aurobindo, the early Hick claims that the Divine Reality is “infinite” in two related senses: first, it cannot be grasped by the human mind, and second, its nature has no definable limits, so we can never “say that he is this and no more.”

The early Hick derives his theory of religious pluralism from this Aurobindonian premise of God’s infinitude and illimitability: each world religion captures some real “aspect or range of aspects” of the Infinite Reality, but no religion captures the *whole* of the Infinite Reality. Like Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Aurobindo, Hick invokes the parable of the “blind men and the elephant” and draws the moral that each religion refers “only to one aspect of the total reality.”<sup>67</sup>

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Hick does not refer to the modern nonsectarian Vedānta of Sri Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, and Sri Aurobindo.

66. Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, 139–40.

67. Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, 140. Hick claims that this parable is traditionally attributed to the Buddha.

Hick also cites in support of his theory of religious pluralism R̥g Veda I.164 and 4.11 of the *Bhagavad Gītā*.<sup>68</sup> Although Hick does not refer to Vivekananda anywhere in his book, Hick may very well have known that Vivekananda was the first to popularize these Hindu scriptural passages and to draw out their implications for religious pluralism.

Later in the chapter, Hick suggests that this pluralist model resolves the problem of conflicting religious truth-claims by conceiving the ultimate reality as personal in one aspect and nonpersonal in another aspect:

Speaking very tentatively, I think it *is* possible that the sense of the divine as non-personal may indeed reflect an aspect of the same infinite reality that is encountered as personal in theistic religious experience. . . . Theologically, the Hindu distinction between Nirguna Brahman and Saguna Brahman is important and should be adopted into western religious thought. Detaching this distinction, then, from its Hindu context we may say that Nirguna God is the eternal self-existent divine reality, beyond the scope of all human categories, including personality; and Saguna God is God in relation to his creation and with the attributes which express this relationship, such as personality, omnipotence, goodness, love and omniscience. Thus the one ultimate reality is both Nirguna and non-personal, and Saguna and personal, in a duality which is in principle acceptable to human understanding.<sup>69</sup>

Like Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Aurobindo, the early Hick maintains that personal and nonpersonal conceptions of the ultimate reality correspond to different real “aspects” of “the same infinite reality.” It is equally revealing that Hick clarifies his theory of religious pluralism by invoking the “Hindu distinction between Nirguna and Saguna Brahman.” As we have already seen, Hick identifies “contemporary philosophical Hinduism” with Advaita Vedānta, which—in Ptolemaic fashion—considers *nirguṇa* Brahman alone to be real and, accordingly, demotes the personal God (*saguna* Brahman) to the level of unreality. Interestingly, Hick appropriates this *nirguṇa-saguna* distinction but detaches it from its “Hindu”—which, for Hick, means Advaitic—context. In opposition to the Ptolemaic Advaitic paradigm, Hick claims that the “one ultimate reality is both Nirguna . . . and Saguna.” In other words, the early Hick places *nirguṇa* and *saguna* Brahman on an ontological par by conceiving them as complementary aspects of one and the same Infinite Reality.<sup>70</sup>

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68. Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, 140.

69. Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, 144.

70. Hence, I think Duncan Forrester is mistaken in accusing the early Hick of being a crypto-Advaitin. See Forrester, “Professor Hick and the Universe of Faiths,” *Scottish Journal*



However, since the early Hick wrongly conflated both modern philosophical Hinduism and Vedānta with Advaita Vedānta in particular, he failed to recognize that his own non-Ptolemaic view of the ontological parity of the impersonal and personal aspects of the Infinite God is a central tenet of the nonsectarian Vedānta of Sri Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, and Sri Aurobindo—which is *itself* a major thought-current within modern philosophical Hinduism. Hick claims that the “one ultimate reality” is, in one aspect, the “Nirguna God” which is “beyond the scope of all human categories,” and in another aspect, the “Saguna God,” who is “God in relation to his creation.” Notice how closely Hick echoes Sri Aurobindo and Sri Ramakrishna. According to Sri Ramakrishna, “[w]hen God is actionless [*niṣkriyā*], I call God ‘Brahman’; when God creates, preserves, and destroys, I call God ‘Śakti’” (K 861 / G 802). Similarly, Sri Aurobindo claims that “the Saguna Brahman active and possessed of qualities” and “the Nirguna immobile and without qualities” are dual aspects of “the one Ishwara.”<sup>71</sup>

Evidently, while the early Hick explicitly appealed to Sri Aurobindo's logic of the infinite, he did not have a clear understanding of the broader nonsectarian Vedāntic framework within which Sri Aurobindo's logic of the infinite was embedded. As a result, the early Hick failed to recognize the deep philosophical affinities between his own theory of religious pluralism and nonsectarian Vedānta. Indeed, as we will see, Hick's impoverished understanding of Vedānta may even help explain why he soon went on to abandon his early pluralist doctrine in favor of his now well-known quasi-Kantian theory of religious pluralism.

### III. The Ontological Underpinnings of the Later Hick's Quasi-Kantian Model of Religious Pluralism

Hick's conference paper “Mystical Experience as Cognition” (1976) signaled his tacit, but momentous, abandonment of his early Aurobindonian religious pluralism in favor of a quasi-Kantian pluralist model.<sup>72</sup> Hick subsequently developed

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of *Theology* 1 (1976), 65–72. Forrester overlooks the fact that Hick explicitly *rejects* Advaitic inclusivism in the ninth chapter of *God and the Universe of Faiths*.

71. Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, 367.

72. In his response to an earlier draft of this chapter, Bradley Cochran questions my use of the language of “abandonment.” I concede to Cochran that Hick himself nowhere suggests that his quasi-Kantian theory represents an abandonment of his earlier theory of religious pluralism. Nonetheless, I make the case throughout this chapter that the ontological foundations of Hick's early and late theories of religious pluralism are so fundamentally opposed that the language of abandonment is justified. I also suspect that Hick may have been more inclined to recognize the dramatic evolution of his own views on religious pluralism if he had a deeper understanding of the nonsectarian Vedāntic tradition of Sri Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, and Sri Aurobindo.



his quasi-Kantian theory of religious pluralism in numerous works published in the 1980s and 1990s. Hick's *An Interpretation of Religion* (1989) contains his most detailed and careful presentation of his quasi-Kantian pluralist theory, while *A Christian Theology of Religions: The Rainbow of Faiths* (1995) further elaborates the theory and defends it against numerous objections. In my ensuing discussion of Hick's quasi-Kantian theory, I will rely primarily on these two works, although I will also sometimes refer to his other post-1976 works as well.

In his early thinking, Hick explicitly favored Sri Aurobindo's strategy for reconciling personal and nonpersonal conceptions of the ultimate reality: what appear to the finite human mind to be contradictory attributes—such as personality and impersonality—can, in fact, coexist in the Infinite Divine Reality. Accordingly, the early Hick conspicuously refrained from downgrading the ontological status of the personal and nonpersonal ultimates of the various world religions. By 1976, however, Hick repudiated this Aurobindonian strategy in favor of a quasi-Kantian strategy.<sup>73</sup> Instead of claiming that each religion captures a real "aspect" of the Infinite Divine Reality, Hick now maintains that the noumenal "Real" is strictly unknowable and that the personal Gods and nonpersonal Absolutes of the various world religions are different culturally conditioned—and, therefore, phenomenal—conceptions of one and the same noumenal Real.<sup>74</sup> That is, Hick claims that the unknowable Real *an sich* enjoys a different ontological status from the ultimates of all the world religions: while he grants *empirical* reality to the various religious ultimates, he accords full-blown *ontological* reality only to the Real *an sich*.<sup>75</sup> By contrast, the early Hick followed Sri Ramakrishna

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73. I call the later Hick's view "quasi-Kantian" rather than simply "Kantian" because his views differ from Kant's in important respects and because Kant himself did not endorse a religious pluralist position. Hick differs from Kant most fundamentally in his understanding of the categories. While Kant held that there were only twelve categories, Hick seems to hold that people's culturally conditioned conceptions of God also function as categories (or, at least, category-analogues) that shape how people experience God. For a helpful discussion of this issue, see J. William Forgie, "Hyper-Kantianism in Recent Discussions of Mystical Experience," *Religious Studies* 21.2 (June 1985), 208–14. The question of Hick's precise use of Kant is a controversial one in the scholarly literature. For the purposes of this chapter, however, I need not enter into this interpretive controversy. If Hick took nothing else from Kant, he certainly accepted Kant's ontological distinction between noumenon and phenomenon (see, for instance, Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 349). My criticisms of Hick's quasi-Kantian theory in section IV target precisely the noumenal-phenomenal ontology at its basis.

74. See Hick, "Mystical Experience as Cognition," 428–30.

75. There is a complication here. In *An Interpretation of Religion* (269–75), Hick actually considers two different models for understanding the ontological status of the divine *personae* of the world's theistic religions. On one model, the divine *personae* are human projections, while on the other model, the divine *personae* are ontologically real entities. Interestingly, Hick claims that his quasi-Kantian pluralist theory "could accommodate either of these models" (*An Interpretation of Religion*, 275). However, as William Hasker has shown, only the human projection model of divine *personae* is actually compatible with Hick's quasi-Kantian theory.

and Sri Aurobindo in maintaining that personal and nonpersonal conceptions of the ultimate reality capture different *ontologically real* “aspects” of “the same infinite reality.”<sup>76</sup>

The later Hick also radically reconceives the nature of divine infinitude. While the early Hick understood divine infinitude as a positive, inexhaustible plenitude that exceeds rational comprehension, the later Hick conceives the infinitude of the Real *an sich* in strictly negative terms:

This distinction between the Real as it is in itself and as it is thought and experienced through our human religious concepts entails . . . that we cannot apply to the Real *an sich* the characteristics encountered in its *personae* and *impersonae*. Thus it cannot be said to be one or many, person or thing, conscious or unconscious, purposive or non-purposive, substance or process, good or evil, loving or hating. None of the descriptive terms that apply within the realm of human experience can apply literally to the unexperienceable reality that underlies that realm.<sup>77</sup>

While the early Hick adopted the nonsectarian Vedāntic position that the Infinite Reality is *both* personal *and* nonpersonal in different aspects, the later Hick maintains that the noumenal Real is *neither* personal *nor* nonpersonal. As the later Hick puts it, the Real *an sich* “is unlimited and therefore may not be equated without remainder with anything that can be humanly experienced and defined. Unlimitedness, or infinity, is a negative concept, the denial of limitation.”<sup>78</sup> By conceiving divine infinity as a “negative concept,” the later Hick sets up an ontological gulf between the Real *an sich* and the various human experiences of the Real. Ironically, even though the early Hick followed Chubb in rejecting this Kantian ontology in favor of Sri Aurobindo’s logic of the infinite, the later Hick does an about-face, preferring the quasi-Kantian model of a strictly

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See Hasker, “The Many Gods of Hick and Mavrodes,” in *Evidence and Religious Belief*, eds. Kelly James Clark and Raymond J. Van Arragon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 186–99. In his response to Hasker in the same collection, Hick concedes that he was wrong in claiming earlier that both models were equally compatible with his quasi-Kantian theory. See Hick, “Response to Hasker,” in *Evidence and Religious Belief*, eds. Clark and Arragon, 199–201. Hick’s final considered position—which is the relevant one for my discussion—is that the divine *personae* are definitely *not* ontologically real entities but only human projections (“Response to Hasker,” 200–1).

76. Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, 144.

77. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 350.

78. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 237.

unknowable Real *an sich* to the Aurobindonian model of an impersonal-personal Infinite Reality.

Indeed, Hick now sees this Kantian gulf between noumenon and phenomenon as a philosophical virtue, since it provides a rational explanation of how the various personal and nonpersonal conceptions of the Divine Reality can all be true (albeit only phenomenally true). In *A Christian Theology of Religions*, Hick points out that the most serious problem facing any pluralist view is the fact that divine attributes “such as being personal and being non-personal, being a creator and not being a creator” are “mutually contradictory.”<sup>79</sup> For the later Hick, the only way to avoid a “morass of impossibilities” is to “acknowledge that all these attributes are components of our human conceptual repertoire.”<sup>80</sup> That is, Hick’s primary justification for his quasi-Kantian pluralist model seems to be that it avoids ascribing contradictory attributes to the Divine Reality.

This position is puzzling, however, since Hick himself had earlier championed an entirely different strategy for reconciling the various apparently contradictory qualities ascribed to God. In his early thinking, Hick favored Sri Aurobindo’s logic of the infinite, according to which what might *appear* to be a “morass of impossibilities” to the finite human intellect is not impossible for the Infinite God, who is unconstrained by the limits of human thought. For Sri Aurobindo as for the early Hick, our inability to comprehend rationally how God can be at once personal and nonpersonal is neither surprising nor problematic, since God’s infinite nature necessarily exceeds the grasp of the finite intellect. According to Sri Aurobindo, then, attributes such as personality and impersonality—which *appear* contradictory to the finite intellect—in fact coexist in the Infinite Reality.

Interestingly, the later Hick never explicitly refutes this Aurobindonian approach to the problem of conflicting religious truth-claims.<sup>81</sup> Moreover, he no longer even acknowledges that Sri Aurobindo’s logic of the infinite—which he himself had earlier endorsed—provides an entirely different solution to the problem. Accordingly, the later Hick wrongly assumes that the only way to avoid a “morass of impossibilities” is to adopt the quasi-Kantian view that various apparently contradictory attributes belong not to God but to our own “human conceptual repertoire.”

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79. Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions*, 64. Hick frequently repeats this point. See, for instance, *An Interpretation of Religion* (234), where he claims that the “reported ultimates, personal and non-personal,” of the various world religions are “mutually exclusive.”

80. Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions*, 62.

81. Indeed, even in the fourth edition of *Philosophy of Religion* (1990), Hick opted not to remove his statement from the 1973 edition that “there is a program for thought in the exploration of what Aurobindo called ‘the logic of the infinite.’” John Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*, 4th ed. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1990), 115.

As I suggested in the previous section, one possible reason for the later Hick's tacit repudiation of Sri Aurobindo's logic of the infinite was his limited understanding of Hinduism, particularly of the nonsectarian Vedāntic tradition within modern Hindu thought. Tellingly, in *A Christian Theology of Religions*, Hick claims that all religions—including Hinduism—are equally absolutistic:

[E]ach [religion], left to itself, affirms its own uniquely full salvific access to the Real, and this affirmation has developed into a structure of belief which can only accommodate other traditions by subordinating them to itself, whether as total errors or as partial truths. And so a global interpretation which starts from the rough salvific parity of the great traditions will not be identical with the belief-system of any one of them. This is why we have either to seek a more comprehensive view, or else each return to the absolutism of our own tradition, with Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and so on each affirming the unique superiority of their own path.<sup>82</sup>

Hick claims that all the world religions are inclusivist at best and exclusivist at worst. As we have seen, Hick was aware early on of the inclusivist/Ptolemaic paradigm of Advaita Vedānta within Hinduism, according to which personal conceptions of the ultimate reality are relegated to an inferior position. However, Hick was evidently *not* aware of the more robustly pluralistic paradigm of nonsectarian Vedānta within the Hindu tradition. Hence, Hick is led to posit a false either/or between the “absolutism” of all existing religious traditions and a “more comprehensive” metatheory of religious pluralism that “will not be identical with the belief-system of any one of them.” The nonsectarian Vedāntic model of religious pluralism championed by Sri Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, and Sri Aurobindo flies in the face of Hick's assumption, since it represents a comprehensive metatheory *within* the Hindu tradition itself. Since Hick lacked a clear understanding of this nonsectarian Vedāntic tradition, he not only failed to recognize the Vedāntic underpinnings of his own early Aurobindonian theory of religious pluralism but also adopted a reductive view of modern Hinduism that overlooks its pluralist strain.

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82. Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions*, 48.

#### IV. A Ramakrishnan Critique of Hick's Quasi-Kantian Pluralist Model

We are now in a position to initiate a dialogue between Sri Ramakrishna and the later Hick. It is important to note, first, that the pluralist doctrines of Sri Ramakrishna and the later Hick have certain key features in common. Both Sri Ramakrishna and Hick not only affirm the equal salvific efficacy of the major world religions but also make the ontological claim that all religions center on one and the same Divine Reality. Both of them also adopt a similar strategy for addressing the problem of conflicting religious truth-claims. According to Hick, neither historical truth-claims (such as the claim that Christ died on the Cross) nor transhistorical truth-claims (such as the claim that reincarnation is true) are “soteriologically vital.”<sup>83</sup> From Hick’s perspective, even if Hinduism is wrong, say, in claiming that souls reincarnate or Christianity is wrong in claiming that Christ died on the Cross, the falsity of these truth-claims would not diminish the salvific efficacy of these religions. As Hick puts it, “Whilst holding any or none of these theories we may still participate in the transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness.”<sup>84</sup> Hick does not deny that certain religious practitioners may take particular historical and transhistorical doctrines to be essential to their faith, but he insists that it would be a mistake for them to universalize this assumption.<sup>85</sup> Even if certain historical and transhistorical doctrines are soteriologically vital for certain people, they are not soteriologically vital for *everyone*.

As I argued in section II of the previous chapter, Sri Ramakrishna’s stance on historical and transhistorical religious truth-claims is remarkably similar to Hick’s. While Vaiṣṇavas take Kṛṣṇa’s *gopī-līlā* to be a real historical event and followers of the Brāhmo Samāj do not, Sri Ramakrishna insists that such historical doctrines are not soteriologically vital. Sri Ramakrishna also adopts a similar stance on transhistorical truth-claims such as the Hindu doctrines of reincarnation and *avatāra*-hood. While Sri Ramakrishna himself personally believes in reincarnation and *avatāra*-hood, he claims that belief in these transhistorical doctrines is not essential for God-realization. Like Hick, Sri Ramakrishna maintains that even if a particular religion is wrong about certain historical or transhistorical matters, the falsity of such truth-claims does not detract from that religion’s salvific efficacy. Hick would also likely endorse Sri Ramakrishna’s claim

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83. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 367.

84. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 367.

85. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 369.

that since all religions have some mistakes, the claim—made by exclusivists and some inclusivists—that one religion is more correct than all others is untenable.

However, Sri Ramakrishna and the later Hick part ways in their respective strategies for resolving apparently conflicting claims about the ultimate reality. According to the later Hick, the personal and nonpersonal ultimates taught by the world religions are all different phenomenal manifestations of the same unknowable Real *an sich*. Since the various religious conceptions of the ultimate reality have only phenomenal status, they do not pick out any real feature or aspect of the noumenal Real itself. Sri Ramakrishna, in stark contrast to Hick, maintains that personal and nonpersonal conceptions of the Divine Reality capture different ontologically real aspects of one and the same Infinite Reality. Hence, while the later Hick maintains that the Real *an sich* is *neither* personal *nor* impersonal, Sri Ramakrishna maintains that the Infinite Reality is *both* personal (*saguṇa*) and impersonal (*nirguṇa*), and much more besides.<sup>86</sup> Sri Ramakrishna, then, would reject the later Hick's quasi-Kantian view in favor of the *early* Hick's Aurobindonian view that the Infinite God is “both personal Lord and non-personal Ground of Being.”<sup>87</sup> While the later Hick's quasi-Kantian pluralist doctrine fixes an ontological gulf between the Real *an sich* and the different phenomenal conceptions of the Real, the nonsectarian Vedāntic models of Sri Ramakrishna and the early Hick grant full-blown ontological reality to the ultimates of the various religions.

Indeed, I will argue that the Achilles heel of the later Hick's theory of religious pluralism is precisely the Kantian noumenal-phenomenal ontology at its basis. In particular, there are four major weaknesses in the later Hick's quasi-Kantian pluralist model which make it much less philosophically attractive than the Vedāntic pluralist models of Sri Ramakrishna and the early Hick.

First, the later Hick's quasi-Kantian religious pluralism fails to take at face value many of the central truth-claims of the world religions.<sup>88</sup> By downgrading the personal and nonpersonal ultimates of the various religions to phenomenal status, Hick does violence to the self-understanding of most religious practitioners, who believe in the literal reality of their respective ultimates. As George Mavrodes puts it, “Hick's view suggests that almost all of the world's religious believers are wildly mistaken about the objects of their worship and adoration.”<sup>89</sup>

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86. For references, see my discussion of VV1 and VV3 in section III of chapter 1.

87. Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*, 2nd ed., 128.

88. Numerous philosophers have criticized Hick on this score. See, for instance, George Mavrodes's objections to Hick in *Dialogues in the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. John Hick (London: Palgrave, 2001), 62–69, and Harold Netland, “Professor Hick on Religious Pluralism,” *Religious Studies* 22 (1986), 255–66.

89. Hick, ed., *Dialogues in the Philosophy of Religion*, 69 n. 6. For a similar criticism of Hick, see S. Mark Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995), 34.

Anticipating this objection, Hick insists that “these divine *personae* and metaphysical *impersonae* . . . are not illusory but are empirically, that is experientially, real as authentic manifestations of the Real.”<sup>90</sup> Mavrodes’s point, however, is that most religious believers take their respective ultimates to be not only “empirically” real but also ontologically real, while Hick takes all such religious ultimates to be ontologically *false*.

Hick tries to downplay the ontological falsity of religious ultimates by strategically using the language of “manifestation.” As Hick puts it, “the different objects of worship and foci of contemplation are different manifestations of the ineffable Real-in-itself.”<sup>91</sup> Hick’s language of manifestation implies an ontological continuity between the noumenal Real and its various phenomenal “manifestations,” thereby lending a veneer of objective reality to the religious ultimates. However, his quasi-Kantian framework emphatically *denies* any ontological continuity between the noumenal and the phenomenal.<sup>92</sup> According to Hick, the various attributes ascribed by religions to the ultimate reality, far from corresponding to objective aspects of the noumenal Real, are nothing but subjective category-analogues contributed by the human mind. Hence, Hick’s repeated assertion that the divine *personae* and *impersonae* are “manifestations” of the Real *an sich* is misleading and unjustified, since his quasi-Kantian ontology precludes the very possibility of divine manifestation.

In stark contrast to Hick’s quasi-Kantian model, Sri Ramakrishna’s *vijñāna*-based religious pluralism accommodates the possibility of full-blooded divine manifestation. As Sri Ramakrishna puts it, “God manifests Himself to seekers in various forms and aspects” (*K* 101 / *G* 150).<sup>93</sup> For Sri Ramakrishna, the personal and nonpersonal ultimates of the various world religions are *ontologically real* manifestations of one and the same Infinite Reality. By contrast, the later Hick takes these religious ultimates to be empirically real but ontologically false. Moreover, while Hick notoriously claims that the Christian doctrine of Christ as a divine incarnation is only “mythologically” but not literally true, Sri Ramakrishna accepts the literal reality of numerous divine incarnations, including Buddha, Christ, Rāma, Kṛṣṇa, and Caitanya.<sup>94</sup>

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90. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 242.

91. Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions*, 68. See also Hick’s use of the language of “manifestation” in *An Interpretation of Religion*, 242–43.

92. This point is persuasively made by Netland (“Professor Hick on Religious Pluralism,” 261), Mavrodes (Hick, ed., *Dialogues in the Philosophy of Religion*, 67), and Barua (“Hick and Radhakrishnan on Religious Diversity,” 185–88).

93. For a detailed account of Sri Ramakrishna’s views on divine manifestation, see chapter 5.

94. See Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions*, 86–103 and John Hick, “The Non-absoluteness of Christianity,” in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, ed. John Hick and Paul Knitter (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987), 16–36.



As I will discuss in greater detail in the next chapter, Hick's quasi-Kantian ontology also leads him to adopt a highly controversial constructivist approach to mystical experience, which conflicts with the self-understanding of most mystics in different religious traditions.<sup>95</sup> Appealing to Steven Katz's classic defense of mystical constructivism, Hick defends the "hypothesis that even in the profoundest unitive mysticism the mind operates with culturally specific concepts and that what is experienced is accordingly a manifestation of the Real rather than the postulated Real *an sich*."<sup>96</sup> Hick frankly admits that this constructivist understanding of mystical experience contradicts the "claims of Zen and of advaitic and theistic unitive mysticism."<sup>97</sup> According to Hick, what mystics experience is only a mentally conditioned phenomenal form of the ultimate reality rather than the ultimate reality itself. Hick's constructivism is especially ironic since he relies heavily on the testimony of numerous mystics for his own key distinction between the Real *an sich* and phenomenal conceptions of the Real.<sup>98</sup>

By contrast, Sri Ramakrishna's pluralist model fully accepts the self-understanding of mystics in various religious traditions, who claim to enjoy direct, unmediated experience of the ultimate reality. An accomplished mystic in his own right, Sri Ramakrishna claims to have had mystical experiences of both the personal and the nonpersonal aspects of the Infinite Reality. From Sri Ramakrishna's perspective, Hick's constructivist assumption that mystical experiences are always mediated by "culturally specific concepts" betrays a gross misunderstanding of the epistemically *sui generis* character of mystical experiences, which often transcend the mind altogether.<sup>99</sup> According to Sri Ramakrishna, "reasoning stops altogether" in the Advaitic state of *nirvikalpa samādhi* (*K* 49–50 / *G* 103). Sri Ramakrishna is equally emphatic that the highest theistic mystical experiences are also direct and unmediated: "God reveals Himself to the *bhakta* as a Person" (*K* 99 / *G* 148). Theistic mystics, he claims, have the unmediated experience of ontologically real forms of the personal God. On the basis of his own diverse spiritual experiences, Sri Ramakrishna champions what I call a "manifestationist" approach to mystical experience, according to which the Infinite Reality actually manifests Himself to different mystics in different forms

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95. See section II of Chapter 5.

96. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 295–96. For a more detailed critical examination of Katz's constructivist view, see section II of the next chapter.

97. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 294.

98. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 236–39. Hick seems to me to lapse into eisegesis when he reads the Kantian noumenal-phenomenal ontology into the testimony of mystics.

99. The next chapter provides more in-depth criticisms of constructivism and reconstructs in detail Sri Ramakrishna's alternative "manifestationist" paradigm of mystical experience.



and aspects. In the next chapter, I will argue that Sri Ramakrishna's manifestationist paradigm of mystical experience has numerous philosophical advantages over the constructivist paradigm favored by Hick and others.

Hick responds to the charge that he fails to take religions at face value by insisting that "no hypothesis about the relation between the different world religions—unless it simply affirms the truth of one and the falsity of the rest—is going to be congruent with the belief-system of one of them to the exclusion of the others."<sup>100</sup> While Hick is surely right that any metatheory of religious pluralism must come into conflict with certain elements of the belief-systems of most of the world religions, I suspect that critics are complaining that Hick's quasi-Kantian theory is *excessively* revisionary. If one criterion for the plausibility of a theory of religious pluralism is the extent to which it honors the cherished beliefs of religious practitioners, Sri Ramakrishna's *vijñāna*-based religious pluralism has much greater plausibility than Hick's quasi-Kantian theory.<sup>101</sup> Hick not only denies ontological reality to the personal and nonpersonal ultimates of the various religions but also denies the self-understanding of mystics who claim to enjoy direct, unmediated experience of the ultimate reality.

Of course, Sri Ramakrishna's pluralist model—like all pluralist models—also denies certain aspects of the self-understanding of some religious practitioners. In particular, Sri Ramakrishna encourages religious practitioners not to limit God to what they understand of Him. For instance, Sri Ramakrishna would agree with Christians that Christ is the Son of God, but he would also maintain—in contrast to most Christians—that the Infinite God incarnates in other forms as well and that the impersonal aspect of God is as real as His personal aspect. On the other hand, Sri Ramakrishna would agree with Advaitins that one can attain liberation by realizing the impersonal nondual Brahman, but he would also caution Advaitins against *limiting* God to the impersonal Brahman, since the personal Śakti is an equally real aspect of the Infinite Reality. Nonetheless, I would argue that Sri Ramakrishna honors the self-understanding of religious practitioners to a much greater extent than Hick does.<sup>102</sup> Unlike Hick, Sri Ramakrishna not only accepts the ontological reality of the personal and nonpersonal aspects of the Infinite Reality but also maintains that mystical experiences of God are direct and unmediated. For Sri Ramakrishna, while *every* religion captures at least some real aspect of God, no religion captures the *whole* of the Infinite God. For Hick,

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100. Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions*, 48.

101. In the next section of this chapter, I outline adequacy criteria for theories of religious pluralism, including the criterion of plausibility.

102. I am grateful to Ankur Barua for pressing me to clarify my position on the precise extent to which Sri Ramakrishna's religious pluralism honors the self-understanding of religious practitioners.

by contrast, *none* of the religious conceptions of the ultimate reality capture any ontologically real features of the unknowable Real *an sich*.

Second, Hick's postulation of a rather mysterious "Real *an sich*" is insufficiently motivated.<sup>103</sup> Hick admits that his quasi-Kantian conception of an ineffable Real *an sich* is only a tentative "hypothesis," which he postulates in order to account for the salvific efficacy of the major world religions.<sup>104</sup> From Sri Ramakrishna's standpoint, the merely hypothetical status of Hick's quasi-Kantian theory of religious pluralism stems from the fact that Hick arrived at his theory through intellectual reasoning rather than through direct mystical experience.

This fundamental difference between Hick's and Sri Ramakrishna's pluralist models is neatly captured in their respective interpretations of the parable of the blind men and the elephant. Hick admits that the parable usefully illustrates certain aspects of his quasi-Kantian theory, but he warns against pushing the parable too far:

Are we not proposing a picture reminiscent of the ancient allegory of the blind men and the elephant, in which each runs his hands over a different part of the animal, and identifies it differently, a leg as a tree, the trunk as a snake, the tail as a rope, and so on? Clearly, in the story the situation is being described from the point of view of someone who can observe both elephant and blind men. But where is the vantage-point from which one can observe both the divine Reality and the different limited human standpoints from which that Reality is being variously perceived? The advocate of the pluralist understanding cannot pretend to any such cosmic vision. How then does he profess to know that the situation is indeed as he depicts it? The answer is that he does not profess to *know* this, if by knowledge we mean infallible cognition. . . . The pluralist hypothesis is arrived at inductively.<sup>105</sup>

Hick insists that no one can occupy the standpoint of the person "who can observe both elephant and blind men." According to Hick, the advocate of religious pluralism does not enjoy any such "cosmic vision" by means of which he can perceive the Real *an sich* and the various phenomenal forms of the Real taught by the world religions. Hence, instead of claiming that his quasi-Kantian theory is based on "knowledge" or "infallible cognition," Hick claims more modestly that

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103. Mavrodes makes a similar criticism in Hick, ed., *Dialogues in the Philosophy of Religion* (64–67).

104. Hick, *Dialogues in the Philosophy of Religion*, 16.

105. Hick makes a similar point in *A Christian Theology of Religions*, 49.

he arrived at his theory “inductively”—that is, by recognizing the salvific efficacy of all the major world religions and then proposing a hypothesis that best accounts for this fact.<sup>106</sup>

However, as I have shown at length in chapter 3, Sri Ramakrishna affirms precisely what Hick denies, since he advocates the harmony of all religions not as an intellectual hypothesis but as an insight grounded in his own experiential knowledge of God. Sri Ramakrishna actually *practiced* multiple religious and spiritual paths—including Advaita Vedānta, numerous theistic Hindu disciplines, Christianity, and Islam—and claimed to have realized different forms and aspects of one and the same Infinite Reality by means of these diverse paths. To use Hick’s language, Sri Ramakrishna champions a pluralist position precisely on the basis of his “cosmic vision” of *vijñāna*, the spiritual realization of the impersonal-personal Infinite Reality. Accordingly, in Sri Ramakrishna’s rendering of the parable of the blind men and the elephant, the person who sees that each of the blind men is touching a different part of the same elephant represents the *vijñānī*, who has experienced multiple aspects and forms of the Infinite Reality.<sup>107</sup> At the same time, however, Sri Ramakrishna acknowledges an important *disanalogy* between the standpoint of the sighted person in the parable and the standpoint of the *vijñānī*. While the man in the parable sees the entire elephant, Sri Ramakrishna insists that no one—not even the *vijñānī*—can experience the whole of the Infinite God.<sup>108</sup> Nonetheless, a *vijñānī* such as Sri Ramakrishna, who has experienced *multiple* aspects of God, occupies a unique epistemic vantage point from which he is able to harmonize conflicting religious truth-claims about the nature of the ultimate reality.

We are now in a position to appreciate the fundamental difference between Hick’s inductive method and Sri Ramakrishna’s method of what might be called “mystico-empirical” induction. Hick’s starting point is the abundant empirical evidence he finds for the roughly equal salvific efficacy of all the world religions. Hick then hypothesizes that the postulation of an unknowable Real *an sich*—which neither he nor anyone else has experienced or ever *can* experience—is the best way to account for this empirical data. Sri Ramakrishna’s inductive method, unlike Hick’s, is based on a more direct *mystical* empiricism: Sri Ramakrishna took as his primary empirical data the supersensuous facts and realities disclosed to him by his own mystical experiences.<sup>109</sup> Sri Ramakrishna’s mystico-empirical method, he believed,

106. Hick elaborates this inductive method in *A Christian Theology of Religions*, 50–51.

107. See my discussion of Sri Ramakrishna’s blind men and the elephant parable in section I of chapter 3.

108. For an elaboration of this aspect of Sri Ramakrishna’s pluralist view, see my discussion of his parable of the ant and sugar hill in section I of the previous chapter.

109. Stephen Phillips helpfully characterizes Sri Aurobindo’s philosophical method as a “mystic empiricism.” *Aurobindo’s Philosophy of Brahman* (London: E.J. Brill, 1986), 64–67. I use the term “mystical empiricism” in a similar sense.

enabled him to perceive directly the supersensuous ultimates of multiple religions and to develop a pluralist ontology on the basis of his mystical experiences. Of course, there is no way to prove that Sri Ramakrishna's alleged mystical experiences of God were, in fact, veridical. However, I will argue in chapter 6 that it is reasonable for us to believe that the putative mystical experiences of credible subjects have some degree of evidential value. Hence, if we grant even a little evidential value to Sri Ramakrishna's mystical experiences, then other things being equal, his mystically grounded religious pluralism has greater justificatory support than Hick's speculative quasi-Kantian hypothesis, which he arrived at through an indirect method of empirical induction.<sup>110</sup>

Third, the later Hick does not justify adequately his assumption that the ultimate reality cannot be both personal and nonpersonal at the same time. For the later Hick, the most plausible way to account for the mutually exclusive attributes ascribed to the ultimate reality is to treat them as subjective contributions of the human mind rather than as objective attributes of the ultimate reality. Hence, he conceives the Real *an sich* in strictly negative terms as the noumenal reality to which *none* of these attributes apply: it is neither personal nor nonpersonal, and so on. However, as William Alston and Jerome Gellman have convincingly argued, Hick is too quick to assume that the ultimate reality cannot be personal and nonpersonal simultaneously.<sup>111</sup> In opposition to Hick, Gellman conceives divine infinitude as an "inexhaustible plenitude" that accommodates both personality and impersonality:

The idea is not that God actually possesses contradictory attributes. Rather, the idea is that out of God's inexhaustible plenitude He has the innate power to appear as either personal or as impersonal. Or to put it differently, God has an "aspect" which is personal and an "aspect" which is impersonal. Out of the plenitude can emerge either of these aspects in the absence of the other. . . . Unlike Hick, therefore, we are prepared to entertain the thought that God *Himself* is experienced both as a personal being and as an impersonal being.<sup>112</sup>

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110. Indeed, Daniel Howard-Snyder has recently argued that the Real *an sich*, as understood by Hick, not only is impossible but also lacks explanatory power. See his article, "Who or What is God, According to John Hick?," *Topoi* 36 (2017), 571–86.

111. See William Alston's criticism of Hick in Hick, ed., *Dialogues in the Philosophy of Religion*, 47. See also Jerome Gellman, *Experience of God and the Rationality of Theistic Belief* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 90–121.

112. Gellman, *Experience of God and the Rationality of Theistic Belief*, 119.

Gellman's position comes remarkably close to the nonsectarian Vedānta of Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Aurobindo, even though Gellman does not refer to Vedāntic texts or to the early Hick's Aurobindonian theory of religious pluralism. Just as Sri Ramakrishna maintains that "the Reality which is *nirguṇa* is also *saguṇa*" (*K* 50–51 / *G* 103–4), Gellman claims that God "has the innate power to appear as either personal or as impersonal." Like the early Hick, Gellman maintains that theistic and nontheistic religions capture different "aspects" of one and the same Infinite Reality, which "is both . . . non-personal . . . and personal."<sup>113</sup> Translating Gellman's criticism of Hick into the terms of the argument developed in this chapter, we can say that the early Hick's "logic of the infinite" comes back to haunt the later Hick. For the early Hick, the limits of human thought do not dictate the limits of divine possibility, so the Infinite Reality can be simultaneously personal and nonpersonal, even though the finite intellect cannot grasp how this is possible. Since the later Hick never refutes this Aurobindonian logic of the infinite which he himself had once endorsed, it remains a live option.

Fourth, while Hick's quasi-Kantian pluralist theory upholds the equal salvific efficacy of all the major world religions, it does not accommodate the possibility of actively learning from religious traditions other than one's own. For the later Hick, none of the various religious ultimates correspond to ontologically real aspects of the Real *an sich*, so the world religions are not complementary in any meaningful sense.<sup>114</sup> Hence, by encountering other religious traditions, we can learn, at best, about the background cultural assumptions informing different religious conceptions of the ultimate reality, but we cannot learn anything about the ultimate reality itself.<sup>115</sup>

By contrast, Sri Ramakrishna's *vijñāna*-based pluralist model furnishes a strong ontological rationale for the complementarity of all the world religions. For Sri Ramakrishna, the various theistic and nontheistic conceptions of the ultimate reality complement one another, since they correspond to different ontologically real aspects of one and the same Infinite Reality.<sup>116</sup> Accordingly, religious practitioners can gain deeper and more comprehensive insight into the inexhaustible

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113. Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, 144.

114. It is worth noting, however, that the later Hick nonetheless appeals repeatedly to the language of "complementarity." See, for instance, Hick's appeal to the "principle of complementarity" in *An Interpretation of Religion*, 374–75. However, since Hick's quasi-Kantian ontology excludes the possibility of ontological complementarity, his use of the language of "complementarity"—like his use of the language of "manifestation"—is unjustified and misleading.

115. For similar criticisms of Hick, see Jeffery D. Long, "(Tentatively) Putting the Pieces Together: Comparative Theology in the Tradition of Sri Ramakrishna," in *The New Comparative Theology*, ed. Francis Clooney (London: Continuum, 2010), 151–61; Heim, *Salvations*, 7.

116. See my discussion of this issue at the end of section I of chapter 3.

nature of the Infinite Reality by learning from religious faiths other than their own. Therefore, Sri Ramakrishna's pluralist model provides much greater scope for fruitful interreligious dialogue and mutual enrichment than Hick's quasi-Kantian model.

Hick, who was exceptionally responsive to his critics, observed that his critics have not worked hard enough to “work out a viable alternative” to his quasi-Kantian theory of religious pluralism:

As I've always insisted, the hypothesis is offered as the “best explanation,” i.e. the most comprehensive and economical explanation, from a religious point of view, of the facts of the history of religions. A proffered “best explanation” is not a proof, because it is always open to someone else to come forward and offer what they believe is a better explanation. And so the right response of someone who does not like my proposed explanation is not to complain that it is not proved but to work out a viable alternative.<sup>117</sup>

Chapters 3 and 4 of this book have ventured to meet Hick's formidable challenge by making a cumulative case that Sri Ramakrishna's *viññāna*-based pluralist model provides a better explanation of the “facts of the history of religions” than Hick's quasi-Kantian theory.

Interestingly, as I have argued in the course of this chapter, Hick's own early Aurobindonian theory of religious pluralism contained the rudiments of a more plausible and more robustly pluralistic account of religious diversity than his later quasi-Kantian theory. Had Hick developed his promising early theory along nonsectarian Vedāntic lines, he might have ended up with a more viable model of religious pluralism than the problematic quasi-Kantian one for which he is now famous. Perhaps the Vedāntic road not taken by Hick is the road he *should* have taken—or, at the very least, more fully explored.

## V. Adequacy Criteria for Assessing Theories of Religious Pluralism

In the wake of Hick's pioneering work on religious pluralism, numerous scholars have developed alternative pluralist theories of their own, which they claim can avoid the philosophical problems plaguing Hick's quasi-Kantian theory.<sup>118</sup> Some

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117. Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions*, 51.

118. For a helpful survey of some recent post-Hickean theories of religious pluralism, see Samuel Ruhmkorff, “The Incompatibility Problem and Religious Pluralism beyond Hick,” *Philosophy Compass* 8.5 (2013), 510–22.

of the most prominent of these pluralist theories include Judson Trapnell's experiential pluralism, Raimundo Panikkar's "cosmotheandric" pluralism, S. Mark Heim's "multiple salvations" pluralism, and David Ray Griffin's Whiteheadian complementary pluralism.<sup>119</sup> While it is beyond the scope of this book to evaluate these pluralist theories, I will begin to lay some of the groundwork for future cross-cultural work on religious pluralism by addressing an important metaquestion: in the face of so many competing pluralist theories, what criteria should we employ to adjudicate among these theories and to determine their relative adequacy? I will outline briefly what I take to be the four most important adequacy criteria for assessing theories of religious pluralism: AC1, internal consistency; AC2, robustness; AC3, fruitfulness; and AC4, plausibility.<sup>120</sup>

According to AC1, a theory of religious pluralism must be internally consistent. To assess a given pluralist theory on the basis of this criterion, we would need to ask whether there are any features or implications of the theory that work against the pluralist viewpoint. Clearly, theories of religious pluralism that have inclusivist elements or implications would not fare well on this criterion. Heim, for instance, paradoxically advocates a "pluralistic inclusivism," which maintains that each religious practitioner is rationally justified in taking the salvation taught by her own religion to be ultimate and the salvations taught in other religions to be merely penultimate.<sup>121</sup> As several critics have pointed out, there is a deep tension—if not an outright contradiction—between the pluralist and inclusivist strands in Heim's theory.<sup>122</sup> Since the pluralist theories of both Hick and Sri Ramakrishna consistently maintain that multiple religions have *equal* salvific efficacy, they fare significantly better on AC1 than Heim's pluralist-cum-inclusivist theory.

Turning now to AC2, we can say that the robustness of a theory of religious pluralism depends on the extent to which it honors the particularity of each religion and leaves intact the cherished beliefs of religious practitioners. As Hick

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119. See Judson Trapnell, "Indian Sources on the Possibility of a Pluralist View of Religions," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 35.2 (Spring 1998), 210–35; Heim, *Salvations*; Raimundo Panikkar, "The Invisible Harmony: A Universal Theory of Religion or a Cosmic Confidence in Reality?," in *Toward a Universal Theology of Religion*, ed. Leonard Swidler (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987), 118–53; David Ray Griffin, "John Cobb's Whiteheadian Complementary Pluralism," in *Deep Religious Pluralism: Whitehead's Philosophy and Religious Diversity*, ed. David Ray Griffin (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 39–66.

120. I am grateful to Ankur Barua for suggesting that I add a section on adequacy criteria.

121. Heim, *Salvations*, 131.

122. For convincing criticisms of Heim's pluralist theory, see Andrew Schwartz, "Epistemic Justification and Religious Truth Claims: Heim's More Pluralistic Hypothesis," *Claremont Journal of Religion* 1.1 (January 2012), 54–69, and Ruhmkorff, "The Incompatibility Problem," 516–17.



rightly points out,<sup>123</sup> *no* theory of religious pluralism can be maximally robust in this sense, since any coherent pluralist theory must deny at least some aspects of the self-understanding of certain religious practitioners. Nonetheless, different pluralist theories exhibit varying degrees of robustness. For instance, while Hick downgrades the ultimates of the world religions to merely phenomenal status, Sri Ramakrishna grants full-blown ontological reality to the various religious ultimates. In this respect, then, Sri Ramakrishna's religious pluralism is considerably more robust than Hick's quasi-Kantian model.<sup>124</sup>

As for AC3, we can measure the fruitfulness of a given pluralist theory in a variety of ways. However, two measures of fruitfulness are especially important: the extent to which a pluralist theory can (1) reduce religious conflict and (2) foster interreligious dialogue. In the previous section, I argued that the subjectivist epistemology at the basis of Hick's quasi-Kantian theory precludes the possibility of learning from religions other than one's own. For Hick, by exposing ourselves to other religions, we do not so much gain insight into the nature of ultimate reality as we learn about the differing cultural assumptions of various religious practitioners. For Sri Ramakrishna, by contrast, our encounter with other religions can teach us about genuine aspects or forms of the Infinite Reality that are not emphasized or even accepted by our own religion. Since Sri Ramakrishna's *vijñāna*-based conception of the impersonal-personal Infinite Reality furnishes a strong ontological basis for interreligious dialogue, his model of religious pluralism fares better on AC3 than Hick's quasi-Kantian model.

AC4, the plausibility criterion, requires us to ask: do we have good reason to believe that a given theory of religious pluralism is true? Of course, it is very likely impossible to *prove*, in a conclusive manner, that any theory of religious diversity—be it pluralist, inclusivist, or exclusivist—is true. Nonetheless, one could still argue, on various grounds, that a particular theory of religious pluralism is *more likely* to be true than other theories. For instance, some pluralist theories can be shown to have greater evidential support than others. As we saw in the previous section, while Hick presents his quasi-Kantian theory as an intellectual “hypothesis,”<sup>125</sup> Sri Ramakrishna affirms the harmony of all religions as a spiritual conviction grounded in his own diverse mystical experiences of God. Therefore, if we grant at least some evidential value to Sri Ramakrishna's putative mystical experiences—as I argue in chapter 6 that we should—then his

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123. Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions*, 48 (quoted in the previous section).

124. For an in-depth elaboration and defense of this claim, see the first of my four criticisms of Hick's quasi-Kantian pluralist theory in the previous section of this chapter.

125. Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions*, 51.



*vijñāna*-based religious pluralism has greater evidential support, other things being equal, than any pluralist theory not based on the direct mystical experience of God.

The way forward, then, is to expand and deepen philosophical discourse on religious pluralism along two dimensions. First, both Western and non-Western theories of religious pluralism should be given equal airtime and brought into fruitful dialogue. Second, in order to compare and evaluate these competing pluralist theories, we need to develop and justify—in much greater depth and detail than I have done in this section—the main criteria for assessing the adequacy of different pluralist theories and to determine the relative weight of each criterion. Sri Ramakrishna, I hope to have shown, has much to contribute to this collective, and immensely important, endeavor.



## MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE



## 5

BEYOND PERENNIALISM AND  
CONSTRUCTIVISMSRI RAMAKRISHNA'S MANIFESTATIONIST  
MODEL OF MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE

Mystics of various world religions have often left behind rich and fascinating descriptions of their mystical experiences.<sup>1</sup> By analyzing and comparing the testimony of these mystics, many recent philosophers have attempted to develop a general theory of the nature of mystical experience. Any such general theory has to account for the fact that mystics have described their experiences in a variety of ways. Jewish mystics, for instance, tend to describe the ultimate mystical experience as *devekuth*, an experience of “clinging” to God in which there remains a fundamental difference between the individual and God.<sup>2</sup> Theistic mystics in Hindu, Christian, and Islamic traditions often describe their experiences in terms of a loving union with God. For instance, the Catholic mystic Heinrich von Seuse described this loving union as an experience in which the mystic “is quite dead to himself, and is entirely lost in God, has passed into Him, and has become one spirit with Him in all respects, just as a little drop of water

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1. For the purposes of chapters 5 and 6, I define “mystical experience” as an experience which the subject takes to be an experience of ultimate reality. Three features of this definition are worth highlighting. First, the definition does not presuppose the veridicality of the mystical experience, since the subject can be mistaken in taking his or her experience to be an experience of ultimate reality. Second, I use the term “ultimate reality” rather than “God” in order to accommodate both theistic and nontheistic mystical experiences. Third, according to this definition, mystical visions of various divine forms also count as mystical experiences. Section III of this chapter argues that Sri Ramakrishna's reports of his own numerous visions of God lend strong support to the view that divine visions count as mystical experiences.

2. Steven Katz discusses *devekuth* in his article “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism,” in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, ed. Steven Katz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 33–36.

that is poured into a large quantity of wine.”<sup>3</sup> However, Seuse was quick to add that the mystic’s union with God should not be understood as absolute identity, since the mystic’s “being remains, though in a different form, in a different glory, and in a different power.”<sup>4</sup> Hindu mystics in the nontheistic tradition of Advaita Vedānta have gone even further than Seuse by claiming to have direct knowledge of their absolute identity with the impersonal nondual Brahman.<sup>5</sup> Occasionally, the Christian mystic Meister Eckhart and the Sufi mystic Maṣṣūr al-Ḥallāj also described their mystical experiences in language that suggests, or at least verges on, absolute identity with God.<sup>6</sup> Many Buddhist mystics, meanwhile, have described the ultimate state of *nibbāna* in negative terms as the total extinction of suffering or as the realization that there is no permanent self or soul.

The philosophical challenge is to develop a theory of mystical experience that adequately accounts for the sheer diversity of mystical testimony both within, and across, religious traditions. In recent analytic philosophy of religion, two competing theories of mystical experience have been especially influential: perennialism and constructivism.<sup>7</sup> Perennialists such as Walter Stace and Ninian Smart maintain that there is a small number of common types of mystical experience across different religious traditions.<sup>8</sup> Distinguishing experience from interpretation, perennialists argue that mystics in different traditions interpreted the same mystical experience in various ways due to factors such as differing cultural and theological backgrounds and the pressures of religious orthodoxy. By contrast, constructivists such as Steven Katz and John Hick argue that a mystic’s pre-experiential beliefs and concepts play a key role in shaping or constructing

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3. Cited in R. C. Zaehner, *Mysticism Sacred and Profane* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1957), 21.

4. Cited in Zaehner, *Mysticism Sacred and Profane*, 21.

5. See, for instance, *Talks with Ramana Maharshi*, trans. Munagala Venkatramaiah (Tiruvannamalai: Sri Ramanasramam, 1963) and *I Am That: Conversations with Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj*, trans. Maurice Frydman (Bombay: Chetana, 1978). Sri Ramakrishna frequently likens the experience of Advaitic *nirvikalpa samādhi* to a salt doll melting into the ocean. See, for instance, K 121 / G 170.

6. For instance, Eckhart declared: “God and I, we are one in pure knowledge.” Cited in C. F. Kelley, *Meister Eckhart on Divine Knowledge* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 26. Al-Ḥallāj made the famous statement: “I am the Absolute” (“*ana al-Ḥaqq*”). Cited in *The New Encyclopedia of Islam*, ed. Cyril Glassé and Huston Smith (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2001), 166.

7. I follow Jerome Gellman’s use of the terms “perennialism” and “constructivism” in his article “Mysticism,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2014 edition (<http://plato.stanford.edu>).

8. W. T. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy* (London: Macmillan, 1961); Ninian Smart, “Interpretation and Mystical Experience,” *Religious Studies* 1 (1965), 75–87.

the mystical experience itself.<sup>9</sup> According to constructivists, various mystics have fundamentally different mystical experiences because the concepts and beliefs they *bring* to their experiences differ.

After decades of fierce debate, perennialists and constructivists seem to have reached a stalemate. We can move the discussion forward, I suggest, by considering Sri Ramakrishna's mystical testimony and teachings. Western philosophers have largely ignored Sri Ramakrishna, in spite of his direct relevance to philosophical discussions of mysticism. Moreover, the few philosophers who do refer to Sri Ramakrishna tend to take his statements out of context and attempt to fit him into their own preconceived conceptual frameworks. Stace, for instance, cites Sri Ramakrishna's description of his experience of *nirvikalpa samādhi* but fails to recognize that it was the culmination of his practice of Advaita Vedānta. As a result, Stace wrongly dismisses Sri Ramakrishna's Advaitic experience as a subjective "trance" that does not even count as a genuine mystical experience.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, R. C. Zaehner—unaware of Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical framework of Vijñāna Vedānta—mistakenly assumes that Sri Ramakrishna was "torn" between Advaita Vedānta and devotion to a personal God.<sup>11</sup> On the basis of this misinterpretation, Zaehner appeals to Sri Ramakrishna's theistic experiences as evidence to support his own highly controversial Christian argument for the superiority of theistic experience to monistic experience.<sup>12</sup>

Such piecemeal and biased discussions of Sri Ramakrishna not only distort his nuanced views on mystical experience but also overlook their far-reaching philosophical significance. Chapters 5 and 6 of this book attempt to provide a more charitable and comprehensive examination of Sri Ramakrishna's mystical testimony and teachings. This chapter argues that Sri Ramakrishna's unique approach to mysticism considerably enriches our understanding of the nature and phenomenology of mystical experience. The next chapter draws upon Sri Ramakrishna's mystical testimony in order to strengthen contemporary philosophical defenses of the epistemic value of mystical experience.

Sections I and II of this chapter provide the background needed to appreciate the sophistication and contemporary relevance of Sri Ramakrishna's views on mystical experience. Section I critically examines major perennialist models of mystical experience, focusing especially on the influential views of Stace. Section II then examines the constructivist models of Katz and Hick. Section

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9. Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism"; John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989), 165–71 and 292–96.

10. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 52.

11. Zaehner, *Mysticism Sacred and Profane*, 131–32.

12. Zaehner, *Mysticism Sacred and Profane*, 130–34.

III demonstrates that perennialists and constructivists, in spite of their many differences, tend to adopt a shared methodology based on indirect textual interpretation rather than direct experience. Drawing on the work of Smart and Frits Staal, I contend that mystics themselves are in a far better epistemic position than nonmystic philosophers to determine accurately the phenomenology of mystical experience. Unlike most philosophers, Sri Ramakrishna arrived at a general philosophical account of mystical experience through the direct experiential method. Many features of Sri Ramakrishna's rich mystical testimony, I argue, cannot be explained adequately in terms of either perennialism or constructivism.

Section IV reconstructs Sri Ramakrishna's new conceptual paradigm for understanding mystical experience, according to which one and the same Infinite Reality manifests itself to different mystics in various forms and aspects. Sri Ramakrishna's "manifestationist" paradigm of mystical experience, I contend, shares many of the advantages of both perennialism and constructivism but avoids their limitations and weaknesses. Finally, section V defends Sri Ramakrishna against the potential objection that his manifestationist paradigm is based on a *philosophia perennis* that fails to account for the diversity of mystical experiences and worldviews.

## I. Perennialist Models

Numerous philosophers have defended the perennialist or "common core" thesis that at least certain types of mystical experience are the same in all cultures and religious traditions. Perennialists appeal to a key distinction between experience and interpretation in order to explain how one and the same mystical experience can be interpreted and described in different ways. It is important to note that perennialism is sometimes associated with, but does not necessarily entail, a "perennial philosophy"—that is, a universal philosophy or theology that explains the common ontological basis of mystical experiences across cultures.<sup>13</sup>

We can distinguish three different versions of perennialism. Early twentieth-century philosophers such as Evelyn Underhill and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan maintained that all mystical experiences are the same but that interpretations of them vary across cultures and traditions. As a Christian theist, Underhill characterizes the universal mystical experience as the ecstatic experience

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13. As Smart observes, "The fact that mysticism is substantially the same in different cultures and religions does not . . . entail that there is a 'perennial philosophy' common to mystics" ("Interpretation and Mystical Experience," 75). Stace's perennialist position, in contrast to Smart's, does seem to be based on a perennial philosophy he calls "pantheism." See Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 207–50.



of union with the personal God.<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, she argues that mystics in Eastern traditions who claim to have experienced absolute identity with an impersonal Absolute have *misinterpreted* what is in fact a theistic unitive experience in which “personality is not lost but made more real.”<sup>15</sup> In stark contrast, Radhakrishnan, a proponent of Advaita Vedānta, characterizes the universal mystical experience as the nondual “realization of the universal self in us.”<sup>16</sup> For Radhakrishnan, the “theological preconceptions” of theistic mystics lead them to misinterpret their nontheistic Advaitic experiences in theistic terms.<sup>17</sup> However, numerous scholars have challenged the perennialist views of both Underhill and Radhakrishnan on the grounds that mystical experience is too diverse a phenomenon to be reduced to a single common denominator.<sup>18</sup>

More recent philosophers have developed more nuanced perennialist positions that are not committed to the implausible thesis that *all* mystical experience is the same. Robert Forman, Gary Kessler, and numerous others make the more delimited perennialist argument that there is one particular *type* of mystical experience—namely, the experience of wakeful contentless consciousness which Forman calls a “pure consciousness event” (PCE)—that is phenomenologically identical across traditions but interpreted in a variety of ways.<sup>19</sup> According to Forman, Meister Eckhart’s experience of *Vergezzenlichkeit* (“forgetfulness”), the anonymous Christian mystic’s experience of the “cloud of unknowing,” and the Zen Buddhist Rosen Takashina’s experience of being “without thoughts” are all instances of the same PCE interpreted in accordance with their respective philosophical frameworks.<sup>20</sup>

Meanwhile, philosophers such as Stace, Smart, and Caroline Franks Davis claim that all mystical experience can be divided into a small class of types which

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14. Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism* (London: Methuen, [1911] 1945), 420. See also Evelyn Underhill, *The Essentials of Mysticism and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oneworld, [1920] 2007), 10.

15. Underhill, *Mysticism*, 420.

16. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *An Idealist View of Life* (New Delhi: HarperCollins, [1932] 2001), 91.

17. Radhakrishnan, *An Idealist View of Life*, 90.

18. See, for instance, Katz, “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism,” 23–25.

19. See Robert Forman, ed., *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), especially Forman’s two contributions, “Introduction: Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting” (3–49) and “Eckhart, *Gezücken*, and the Ground of the Soul” (98–120), and Norman Prigge and Gary Kessler’s article, “Is Mystical Experience Everywhere the Same?” (269–87).

20. Forman, *The Problem of Pure Consciousness*, 31–34 and 98–120.

cut across cultural boundaries.<sup>21</sup> Stace's perennialist position deserves special attention, both because his view has been especially influential and because he refers repeatedly to Sri Ramakrishna in the course of his discussion. In his classic study *Mysticism and Philosophy* (1960), Stace claims that there are only two types of mystical experience found in all cultures and religions: an "extrovertive" experience of Oneness in the apparent multiplicity of the world and a deeper and more complete "introvertive" experience of "pure consciousness" or "undifferentiated unity," which transcends both space-time and subject-object duality.<sup>22</sup> Strangely, Stace mentions Sri Ramakrishna's six-month immersion in *nirvikalpa samādhi* as an example of a "trance" state—enjoyed only by the "more emotional or hysterical mystics"—that does not belong to the "universal core" of mystical experience.<sup>23</sup> Stace's egregious misinterpretation stems from his lack of understanding of the biographical and philosophical context of Sri Ramakrishna's mystical experiences. In fact, as I will discuss in detail in section III, Sri Ramakrishna described his absorption in *nirvikalpa samādhi* as the Advaitic experience of the nondual Ātman, which Stace himself considers to be a paradigmatic case of introvertive mystical experience.<sup>24</sup>

If, as Stace claims, the universal core of all introvertive mystical experience is the experience of an "undifferentiated unity," how does he account for theistic descriptions of mystical experience? Distinguishing experience from interpretation, Stace argues that theistic mystics wrongly interpreted in theistic terms what was in fact a nontheistic introvertive experience of pure consciousness.<sup>25</sup> Addressing Saint Teresa of Ávila's numerous reports of mystical experiences of union with a loving God, Stace condescendingly claims that her intellectual limitations prevented her from distinguishing experience from interpretation.<sup>26</sup> Meanwhile, in order to explain passages where Seuse and Eckhart state that the soul still remains separate from God even in the highest unitive experience, Stace claims that they were pressured by ecclesiastical authority to describe their

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21. This is a paraphrase of Katz's definition of the "most sophisticated form" of perennialism in "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism" (24). For a defense of this perennialist view, see Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*; Smart, "Interpretation and Mystical Experience"; Caroline Franks Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 166–92.

22. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 86 and 132.

23. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 52.

24. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 90.

25. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 103–4.

26. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 103–4. He also refers to Teresa's "lack of critical ability" (26).

mystical experience of complete undifferentiated unity in terms of orthodox Christian theism.<sup>27</sup>

Stace further argues that the Advaita Vedāntin's experience of absolute identity with Brahman, the Buddha's experience of *nirvāṇa*, and the Mahāyāna Buddhist's experience of *śūnyatā* are all the same introvertive experience of undifferentiated unity interpreted in slightly different ways.<sup>28</sup> Jewish mysticism poses a serious problem for Stace, since—as he rightly points out—the “Jewish tradition has always frowned on the kind of mysticism in which identity, or even union, with God is claimed.”<sup>29</sup> Nonetheless, on the basis of a single Hasidic mystic's description of an experience in which his “gaze” was “fixed on Nothing,” Stace makes the sweeping generalization that the Hasidic experience of the “undifferentiated void” is the same “introvertive experience more fully described in other traditions.”<sup>30</sup> He concludes that there is a “clear unanimity of evidence” that mystics in all religious traditions have interpreted one and the same introvertive experience of undifferentiated unity in various ways.<sup>31</sup>

Later in his book, Stace significantly complicates his argument by claiming that introvertive mystics of all traditions experience the Universal Self as a paradoxical “vacuum-plenum.”<sup>32</sup> The plenum dimension of the Universal Self captures its three “positive” aspects: the Universal Self has qualities, is personal, and is dynamic, creative, and active. Stace explicitly aligns the plenum dimension with “the God of theistic religions.”<sup>33</sup> The vacuum dimension of the Universal Self captures its three corresponding “negative” aspects: the Universal Self has no qualities, is impersonal, and is totally inactive, static, and motionless.<sup>34</sup> Stace aligns the vacuum dimension with the Advaitic impersonal (*nirguṇa*) Brahman and Eckhart's “Godhead.” The introvertive mystic, he argues, experiences both the vacuum and plenum dimensions of the Universal Self simultaneously, even though these two dimensions appear contradictory to the “logical understanding.”<sup>35</sup> Accordingly, Stace rejects the philosophical strategies of Eckhart and Śaṅkara, both of whom attempt to dissolve this logical contradiction by granting

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27. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 114–15.

28. See Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 107–10 and 123–27.

29. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 106.

30. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 107.

31. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 110.

32. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 161–78.

33. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 165.

34. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 163.

35. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 175.

higher ontological status to the vacuum dimension (Eckhart's "Godhead" and Śaṅkara's *nirguṇa* Brahman) and lower ontological status to the plenum dimension (Eckhart's "God" and Śaṅkara's *saguṇa* Brahman).

Careful readers of my book will be struck by the parallels between Stace's conception of the vacuum-plenum and Sri Ramakrishna's conception of the impersonal-personal Infinite Reality. In fact, Stace himself cites in support of his vacuum-plenum theory Sri Ramakrishna's teaching on the inseparability of the impersonal Brahman and the dynamic Śakti: "When I think of the Supreme Being as inactive—neither creating nor preserving nor destroying—I call [H]im Brahman . . . the Impersonal God. When I think of Him as active—creative, preserving, destroying—I call him Sakti, or Maya, or Prakriti, the Personal God."<sup>36</sup> Like Sri Ramakrishna, Stace maintains that the ultimate reality is both personal and impersonal and both dynamic and static, even though the rational intellect is unable to grasp how this is possible.

Nonetheless, Stace is mistaken in claiming that Sri Ramakrishna's teaching supports Stace's own perennialist argument that all introvertive mystics experience the Reality as a paradoxical vacuum-plenum. Stace was evidently not aware of the broader philosophical framework of Vijñāna Vedānta within which Sri Ramakrishna's teachings on God are embedded. As we saw in chapter 1, Sri Ramakrishna's teaching about the inseparability of Brahman and Śakti was based on his own mystical experience of *vijñāna*, the dual awareness of the impersonal (*nirguṇa*) and personal (*saguṇa*) aspects of the Infinite Reality. Sri Ramakrishna emphasizes that only *īśvaraśaktis*—divine incarnations and their associates—are capable of attaining the exalted spiritual state of *vijñāna*. *Jīvaśaktis* ("ordinary souls"), by contrast, are typically only capable of realizing *either* the personal *or* the impersonal aspect of the Infinite Reality but not both at the same time. For Sri Ramakrishna, then, the expansive realization of the Divine Reality as a vacuum-plenum is a rarefied form of mystical experience that differs markedly from the experiences of most mystics, which tend to be either exclusively theistic or exclusively nontheistic. Hence, while Stace implausibly maintains that *all* introvertive mystics experience the Reality as a vacuum-plenum, Sri Ramakrishna asserts that only a small minority of mystics enjoy this experience.

Sri Ramakrishna's standpoint of *vijñāna* also problematizes Stace's thesis that extrovertive mystical experience is an incomplete form of introvertive mystical experience. According to Sri Ramakrishna, the experience of *vijñāna* has *both* introvertive and extrovertive dimensions, since the *vijñānī* is not only introvertively aware of his union with the impersonal-personal God but also

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36. Cited in Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 166.

extrovertively aware that God has become the entire universe.<sup>37</sup> Ironically, then, Sri Ramakrishna's *vijñāna*-based teaching about the inseparability of Brahman and Śakti—which Stace cites in support of his own perennialist model of mystical experience—actually undermines Stace's position.

Indeed, Stace's misappropriation of Sri Ramakrishna's teaching on Brahman and Śakti is symptomatic of a much deeper philosophical tension between the two main strands of his perennialist argument. In the second chapter of his book, Stace argues that all introvertive mystics have the nontheistic experience of an undifferentiated unity but that theistic mystics misinterpret this nontheistic experience as an experience of union with the personal God. In the third chapter, by contrast, Stace claims that introvertive mystics experience Reality as a paradoxical vacuum-plenum, the plenum dimension of which is the personal creator God. In a thoroughly Ramakrishnan vein, Stace—as we saw above—even rejects Śaṅkara's and Eckhart's philosophical strategy of granting higher ontological status to the vacuum dimension of Reality and lower ontological status to the plenum dimension. Śaṅkara and Eckhart, Stace argues, fail to take at face value the inescapable paradox that the vacuum and plenum dimensions of Reality are both *equally* present in the introvertive mystical experience.<sup>38</sup> In other words, Stace provides two contradictory accounts of the phenomenology of introvertive mystical experience. On the one hand, he maintains that introvertive mystics experience the plenum dimension of the vacuum-plenum as the theistic God. On the other hand, he claims that introvertive theistic mystics experience a *nontheistic* undifferentiated unity which they retroactively misinterpret as loving union with the personal God.<sup>39</sup>

Apart from this blatant contradiction between the two major strands of Stace's argument, there are two serious problems with his approach to mystical experience more generally. First, while Stace's distinction between experience and interpretation is a potentially valuable one, he does not provide sufficiently reliable hermeneutic criteria for distinguishing between the experiential and interpretive elements in a mystic's testimony.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, it often seems as if Stace's

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37. For a detailed discussion of *vijñāna*, see section III of chapter 1 and the end of section III of this chapter.

38. For instance, Stace notes in *Mysticism and Philosophy* (168) that the vacuum-plenum paradox "is a real part of the mystic's experience." For a convincing critique of this aspect of Stace's argument, see Philip Almond, *Mystical Experience and Religious Doctrine* (Berlin: Mouton, 1982), 78–86.

39. Almond discusses this contradiction in Stace's argument in great detail (*Mystical Experience and Religious Doctrine*, 69–91).

40. Stace acknowledges this difficulty with his experience-interpretation distinction in *Mysticism and Philosophy* (21). He also contrasts "low-level" and "high-level" interpretations of

preconceived bias against theism leads him to dismiss as retrospective interpretation any element in a mystic's testimony that has theistic connotations.<sup>41</sup>

Second, numerous scholars have argued that the single greatest challenge to virtually *all* perennialist theories—including Stace's—is that mystical experiences in various traditions seem to differ *at the phenomenological level*.<sup>42</sup> It is highly likely, for instance, that Teresa considered union with the loving God to be an integral part of her mystical experience rather than a *post facto* interpretation of her experience. It is, therefore, presumptuous in the extreme for a nonmystic philosopher like Stace or Smart to assume that he has a better understanding of the first-person phenomenology of Teresa's mystical experiences than Teresa herself. On the other hand, the more delimited perennialist argument that a certain *type* of mystical experience is phenomenologically identical across cultures—such as Forman's argument about PCEs—does not attempt to fit all mystical experiences into a single mold, so it may have greater plausibility than the more sweeping perennialist claims of philosophers like Stace, Smart, Radhakrishnan, and Underhill.

## II. Constructivist Models

Katz, in his influential article "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism" (1978), pointed out many of the fundamental weaknesses of the perennialist approach to mysticism and argued that a constructivist approach is far better equipped to account for the irreducible diversity of mystical experiences in various religious traditions. Since the publication of Katz's article, numerous philosophers have defended different forms of constructivism.<sup>43</sup> All constructivists maintain that mystical experience is constructed or shaped, at least in part, by the mystic's cultural and theological beliefs. Constructivists differ, however, in their explanation of precisely how, and the extent to which, a mystic's conceptual background shapes his or her mystical experiences.

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mystical experience, but he fails to provide sufficiently rigorous criteria for distinguishing these levels (*Mysticism and Philosophy*, 37).

41. For the charge that Stace is biased against theism, see Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*, 173, and Almond, *Mystical Experience and Religious Doctrine*, 78.

42. See, for instance, Katz's powerful critique of perennialism in "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism."

43. See, for instance, Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 165–71 and 292–96; Ralph Gimello, "Mysticism and Meditation," in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, ed. Katz, 170–99; Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Jure Kristo, "The Interpretation of Religious Experience: What Do Mystics Intend When They Talk about Their Experiences?," *Journal of Religion* 62.1 (January 1952), 21–38.

According to Katz, the perennialist typologies of Stace and Zaehner are highly reductive, since they force “multifarious and extremely variegated forms of mystical experience into improper interpretative categories.”<sup>44</sup> He describes his own essay as a “plea for the recognition of differences,” since it provides a conceptual framework that strives to honor the very real phenomenological differences among various mystical experiences.<sup>45</sup> For instance, the radical difference between Buddhist and Jewish reports of mystical experience strongly suggests that “what the Buddhist experiences as *nirvāṇa* is different from what the Jew experiences as *devekuth*.”<sup>46</sup>

Crucially, Katz adds that a “single epistemological assumption” lies at the basis of his approach to mystical experience: “*There are NO pure (i.e. unmediated) experiences.* Neither mystical experience nor more ordinary forms of experience give any indication, or any grounds for believing, that they are unmediated.”<sup>47</sup> Katz clearly denies that mystical experience is epistemically *sui generis*, since he assumes that mental concepts operate in mystical experience exactly as they do in ordinary experience. On the basis of this highly controversial epistemological assumption, Katz advocates the constructivist view that “there is a clear causal connection between the religious and social structure one brings to experience and the nature of one’s actual religious experience.”<sup>48</sup> That is, a Jewish mystic’s notion of a personal God who is ontologically different from His creatures leads him to experience God as “Other rather than Self.”<sup>49</sup> By contrast, an Advaita Vedāntin’s belief in the sole reality of nondual Brahman and the unreality of the universe leads him to experience his absolute identity with Brahman. According to Katz, constructivism best explains both the sheer diversity of mystical experiences and the fact that mystical experiences often reflect the mystic’s own pre-experiential beliefs.

Katz recognizes that most mystics take the object of their mystical experiences to be real and not just a product of their own mind. Hence, he is careful not to claim that mystical experiences are *wholly* a product of the mystic’s conceptual scheme. Instead, Katz maintains that mystical experiences are “at least partially”

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44. Katz, “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism,” 25.

45. Katz, “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism,” 25. Katz further develops and justifies his constructivist thesis in his later essay “The ‘Conservative’ Character of Mysticism,” in *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*, ed. Steven Katz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 3–60. In this section, I focus on his more philosophically substantial and influential 1978 article.

46. Katz, “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism,” 38. See also 66.

47. Katz, “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism,” 26.

48. Katz, “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism,” 40.

49. Katz, “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism,” 35.



performed by the mystic's pre-experiential beliefs.<sup>50</sup> This phrasing leaves open the possibility that a transcendent reality may play a role in some mystical experiences. Katz elaborates his epistemology of mystical experience as follows:

'Smith experiences God' entails . . . both (a) 'Smith consciously constitutes "God"' as well as (b) '"God" makes himself known to Smith'—recognizing that here too, 'God' has also been, at least partially, conditioned for Smith. For Smith, as for all of us, only knows things as they 'appear' to him.<sup>51</sup>

Katz's scare quotes around "God" are telling: while he admits the possibility that a transcendent reality may play a role in Smith's mystical experience, he insists that this transcendent reality can never directly impinge on Smith's consciousness, since that reality itself, as soon as it enters Smith's consciousness, is at least partly *constituted* by his pre-experiential concepts. For Katz, God Himself (i.e. God as He is apart from Smith's mental concepts) *may* have been the transcendent cause of Smith's mystical experience of "God" (i.e. God as He appears to Smith). In the end, Katz remains resolutely agnostic about whether a transcendent reality plays a role in at least some mystical experiences.

However, many later constructivists take a stronger stand than Katz on this issue. On the one hand, philosophers such as Jure Kristo and Wayne Proudfoot defend atheistic forms of constructivism.<sup>52</sup> For instance, Proudfoot argues that religious experience, far from being an inner perception of a transcendent reality, is nothing but a physiological sensation which the mystic *interprets* as a "religious" feeling.<sup>53</sup> On the other hand, Hick develops Katz's agnostic constructivist position into a full-blown *religious* constructivism.<sup>54</sup> I will focus here on Hick's constructivist view, which is especially relevant to this chapter.

As we saw in section IV of the previous chapter, Hick's constructivist position is rooted in his quasi-Kantian theory of religious pluralism. He admits that many mystics claim that their mystical experiences are unmediated and entirely free from concepts.<sup>55</sup> Hick argues, however, that we cannot take these mystics at face value, since mystics in different religious traditions have experienced

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50. Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," 26. See also 62.

51. Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," 64.

52. See Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, 75–118, and Kristo, "The Interpretation of Religious Experience."

53. Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, 98–102.

54. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 166–67.

55. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 292–93.



a variety of ontological ultimates that conflict with one another. For instance, while an Advaitic mystic claims to have experienced nondual Brahman, a Zen mystic claims to have experienced *śūnyatā*, and a Christian mystic claims to have experienced a loving personal God.<sup>56</sup> Moreover, Hick follows Katz in pointing to a strong correlation between a mystic's pre-experiential conditioning and the precise nature of his or her mystical experience. It is no coincidence, he suggests, that the Advaitin who spends years studying the Upaniṣads and meditating on the Ātman ends up realizing the nondual Ātman, while the Christian who studies the Bible and engages in devotional practices ends up experiencing the loving personal God.<sup>57</sup> According to Hick, the best way to account for these facts is to adopt the constructivist view that mystical experiences are, in fact, mediated by the mystic's conceptual framework.

Although Hick explicitly endorses Katz's constructivist argument, his own constructivist position differs in subtle ways from that of Katz.<sup>58</sup> Most fundamentally, Hick goes much further than Katz in claiming that a transcendent reality as well as the mystic's conceptual set *jointly* determine the nature of the mystic's experience. He sketches a subtle constructivist epistemology of mystical experience on the basis of his quasi-Kantian ontology: the "impact" of the Real *an sich* "is directly prehended at some deep level of the mystic's psyche and then expressed in forms supplied by his or her mind."<sup>59</sup> In other words, there are two phases in Hick's epistemology of mystical experience. First, the Real *an sich* directly impinges on the mystic's psyche at a pre- or subconscious level.<sup>60</sup> Second, this impact of the Real *an sich* generates "information that is transformed into a conscious mode which the mystic and the mystic's community can assimilate."<sup>61</sup> This constructivist epistemology allows Hick to affirm the religious pluralist position that the mystical experiences of all traditions are equally veridical and salvific, since they are all based on the direct impact of the Real *an sich* on the mystic's consciousness. At the same time, however, Hick is able to honor the diversity of mystical experiences across traditions: since a mystic's experience is constructed by the "distinctive ideas" of his or her own tradition, each mystic experiences *different* phenomenal forms of one and the same Real *an sich*.<sup>62</sup>

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56. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 293–94.

57. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 294–95. See also 166.

58. Hick refers approvingly to Katz in *An Interpretation of Religion*, 170 n. 17.

59. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 165–66.

60. In *An Interpretation of Religion*, Hick makes this clear on 165–66 ("directly affecting the human psyche") and 166–67 ("impact of the presence of the Real upon the mystic").

61. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 166–67.

62. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 166.

On the basis of this constructivist epistemology, Hick provides a somewhat paradoxical account of the ontological status of the phenomenal forms of the Real experienced by mystics. He suggests that mystical visions of divine forms—such as “Sri Ramakrishna’s vision of Kālī” and “Isaiah’s vision of Yahweh”<sup>63</sup>—are best understood as veridical hallucinations. As he puts it, “The apparition [of the mystic]—whose content is derived from the percipient’s memory and imagination—is hallucinatory in that there is no physical body present where she sees one; but the hallucination is nevertheless veridical, embodying true information.”<sup>64</sup> Mystical visions are hallucinatory in that they are subjective projections derived from the mystic’s “memory and imagination.”<sup>65</sup> Nonetheless, these mystical visions are *veridical* hallucinations, since they are caused by the actual impact of the Real on the mystic’s psyche. By appealing to this constructivist epistemology, Hick is able to affirm the veridicality of mystical experiences in all traditions without falling into the contradiction of asserting the ontological reality of all the mutually exclusive ultimates mystics claim to have experienced.

One of the primary advantages of constructivism over perennialism is its ability to account for the diversity of mystical experiences both within and across religious traditions. However, constructivist positions also have three major weaknesses. First, while constructivists such as Katz and Hick rightly identify a strong correlation between a mystic’s pre-experiential beliefs and the nature of her mystical experience, they are overhasty in interpreting this correlation as strong evidence for a causal connection. According to Katz, for instance, the fact that the Jewish mystic’s experience of God as Other is consistent with his prior theological training provides “*very* strong evidence that pre-experiential conditioning affects the nature of the experience one actually has.”<sup>66</sup> In order to prove that correlation implies causation, constructivists would have to provide a convincing explanation of apparent counterexamples and also rule out possible noncausal explanations of such a correlation. However, as far as I am aware, constructivists have done neither.<sup>67</sup>

Against constructivists, Forman and many others have pointed to numerous counterexamples of novel or surprising mystical experiences that elude

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63. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 166.

64. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 167.

65. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 167. On the same page, he similarly claims that in the case of mystical visions, “illusion is the vehicle of truth.”

66. Katz, “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism,” 35. Hick makes a similar claim in *An Interpretation of Religion*, 294–95.

67. For a convincing criticism of the constructivist inference of a causal connection from the fact of correlation, see Sallie B. King, “Two Epistemological Models for the Interpretation of Mysticism,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 56.2 (Summer 1988), 263–64.

constructivist explanation.<sup>68</sup> For instance, Sri Aurobindo claimed that he attained the Advaitic state of *nirvikalpa samādhi* in 1908 in spite of the fact that his guru Lele “was against *Advaita Vedanta*” and that the Advaitic doctrine of the unreality of the universe was “quite contrary” to Sri Aurobindo’s own ideas at the time.<sup>69</sup> Clearly, Sri Aurobindo’s non-Advaitic ideas could *not* have shaped his subsequent Advaitic experience. Such instances of mystical novelty and surprise provide strong counterevidence against the constructivist position. Moreover, as I will argue in section IV, Sri Ramakrishna’s manifestationist paradigm provides an alternative *noncausal* explanation of the frequently observed correlation between a mystic’s pre-experiential conditioning and the nature of her mystical experience. According to Sri Ramakrishna, God often chooses to manifest Himself to the mystic in the particular form or aspect the mystic prefers. Constructivists would need to rule out this noncausal explanation of the mystic’s experience before they can infer causation from correlation.

Second, constructivists deny a key element in the self-understanding of most mystics: namely, the conviction that their mystical experiences are epistemically *sui generis* in character.<sup>70</sup> As Anthony Perovich has convincingly shown, numerous mystics have insisted that mystical experience is a nondiscursive form of immediate knowledge that differs radically from ordinary, conceptually mediated cognition. Pseudo-Dionysius, for instance, remarks that the mystic “knows *beyond the mind* by knowing nothing.”<sup>71</sup> Forman argues that the existence of PCEs poses an especially acute problem for constructivists, since those who claim to have experienced PCEs—including Forman himself—invariably insist that PCEs, by their very nature, are entirely free from conceptual mediation. Constructivists are unable to take such mystical testimony at face value, since

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68. See, for instance, Forman, “Introduction,” 20–21; King, “Two Epistemological Models for the Interpretation of Mysticism,” 267; Michael Stoeber, *Theo-Monistic Mysticism: A Hindu-Christian Comparison* (London: Macmillan, 1994), 8–13.

69. Sri Aurobindo, *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, vol. 35: *Letters on Himself and the Ashram* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 2011), 239. See also the extended account of Sri Aurobindo’s unexpected Advaitic experience in Peter Heehs, *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 142–45.

70. For persuasive criticisms of this aspect of the constructivist position, see Anthony Perovich, “Does the Philosophy of Mysticism Rest on a Mistake?,” in *The Problem of Pure Consciousness*, ed. Forman, 244–50; Philip Almond, “Mysticism and Its Contexts,” *Sophia* 27.1 (1988), 216; William Wainwright, *Mysticism: A Study of its Nature, Cognitive Value and Moral Implications* (Brighton, UK: Harvester Press, 1981), 20; King, “Two Epistemological Models,” 263; Richard H. Jones, *Philosophy of Mysticism: Raids on the Ineffable* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2016), 67; and William B. Parsons, *The Enigma of the Oceanic Feeling: Revisioning the Psychoanalytic Theory of Mysticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 120–22.

71. Cited in Perovich, “Does the Philosophy of Mysticism Rest on a Mistake?,” 246.

they maintain that there is no essential difference between ordinary experience and mystical experience. As Katz puts it, the “synthetic operations of the mind are in fact the fundamental conditions under which, and under which alone, mystical experience, as all experience, takes place.”<sup>72</sup> However, Katz does not provide a sound argument in favor of this extremely controversial epistemological claim.<sup>73</sup> Hick’s stance on this issue is more sophisticated than that of Katz, since Hick explicitly acknowledges that some mystics do emphasize the unmediated nature of their experiences. Nonetheless, Hick argues that we have to deny these mystical claims in order to save the pluralist hypothesis that all the major religions have equal salvific efficacy. While Hick is correct that his own quasi-Kantian model of religious pluralism does entail constructivism, I argued in chapters 3 and 4 that Sri Ramakrishna’s *vijñāna*-based religious pluralism does not. In fact, as we will see in section IV, Sri Ramakrishna champions a manifestationist model of mystical experience that fully accommodates mystics’ claims about the epistemically sui generis character of their experiences. Ironically, constructivists, in spite of their concern for recognizing differences, deny the fundamental *epistemic* difference between mystical experience and ordinary experience.

Third, the subjectivist element in all constructivist epistemologies results in an ontologically deflationary account of the divine object of mystical experience. Mystics typically believe that what they experience has fully objective reality. For instance, the Advaitic mystic who experiences total identity with the nondual Ātman takes the Ātman to be objectively real, while the Christian mystic who experiences ecstatic union with the loving personal God takes God to be a fully objective reality. Constructivists, however, do not grant full ontological reality to the divine objects of mystical experience, since they maintain that the mystic’s conceptual framework at least partly shapes what the mystic experiences. For instance, when analyzing the hypothetical Smith’s statement “I experience *x*,” Katz claims that “the mind is active in constructing *x* as experienced.”<sup>74</sup> Similarly, Hick claims that the divine object of mystical experience is a “hallucination,” since what the mystic directly perceives is a product of her own memory and imagination.<sup>75</sup> Although Hick insists that these mystical hallucinations have a real *basis* in the Real *an sich*, he maintains that what the mystics *directly* experience is nothing more than a subjective hallucination. However, neither Katz nor Hick provides

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72. Katz, “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism,” 62–63. Similarly, Hick claims that “even in the profoundest unitive mysticism the mind operates with culturally specific concepts” (*An Interpretation of Religion*, 294–95).

73. See, for instance, Forman’s critique of Katz’s argument in “Introduction,” 15–16.

74. Katz, “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism,” 64.

75. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 167–68.

any evidence that mystics themselves take the divine objects they experience to be partially constructed by their own concepts. Therefore, even a nonnaturalistic constructivist epistemology such as Hick's has to deny the self-understanding of most mystics, who claim that what they experience has fully objective reality.

### III. Sri Ramakrishna's Experiential Method

The first step in cutting across debates about the nature of mystical experience is to recognize that both perennialists and constructivists make sweeping claims about the first-person phenomenology of mystical experience. Perennialists maintain that there is a small number of basic types of mystical experience that are phenomenologically identical across traditions and cultures. Constructivists, by contrast, claim that mystical experiences differ at the phenomenological level since they are at least partly shaped by the mystics' respective conceptual frameworks. Strikingly, in spite of their many philosophical differences, perennialists and constructivists share a fundamental methodological assumption: the fact that most mystics did not reflect philosophically on their own mystical experiences leaves room for philosophers to step in and provide a second-order theoretical account of the phenomenology of mystical experience that best explains the first-order testimony of mystics in various traditions.<sup>76</sup>

The problem, however, is that the vast majority of philosophers are nonmystics who do not have first-person access to mystical experience. They are, therefore, in a poor epistemic position to determine accurately the phenomenology of mystical experiences.<sup>77</sup> Indeed, Smart forcefully argues that we cannot have a fully adequate "theoretical understanding" of mystical experience without first having at least some degree of "existential understanding"—that is, a first-person understanding of what a particular mystical experience is like.<sup>78</sup> Accordingly, Smart even encourages "the philosophical evaluator of mystical experience to go in for spiritual practices himself."<sup>79</sup> Similarly, Staal makes a strong case that philosophers should study mystical experience "directly and from within":<sup>80</sup>

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76. See Stace's articulation of this assumption in *Mysticism and Philosophy* (74–75).

77. For good defenses of this claim, see Frits Staal, *Exploring Mysticism: A Methodological Essay* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, [1975] 2013), 124–25; Ninian Smart, "Understanding Religious Experience," in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, ed. Katz, 10–21; Jones, *Philosophy of Mysticism*, xiv; C. D. Broad, "The Appeal to Religious Experience," in *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, ed. William Rowe and William Wainwright (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), 309.

78. Smart, "Understanding Religious Experience," 10.

79. Smart, "Understanding Religious Experience," 16.

80. Staal, *Exploring Mysticism*, 123.

Mysticism can at least in part be regarded as something affecting the human mind, and it is therefore quite unreasonable to expect that it could be fruitfully explored by confining oneself to literature about or contributed by mystics, or to the behavior and physiological characteristics of mystics and their bodies. No one would willingly impose upon himself such artificial constraints when exploring other phenomena affecting or pertaining to the mind; he would not study perception only by analyzing reports of those who describe what they perceive, or by looking at what happens to people and their bodies when they are engaged in perceiving. What one would do when studying perception, in addition, if not first of all, is to observe and analyze one's own perceptions.<sup>81</sup>

Staal's observation helps pinpoint a major weakness in the methodology of both perennialists and constructivists: they tend to make generalizations about the phenomenology of mystical experience almost exclusively on the basis of textual interpretation. Just as the philosopher of perception can enrich her understanding of the nature of perception by drawing on her own perceptual experiences, the philosopher of mysticism can enrich her understanding of the nature of mystical experience by drawing not only on the recorded testimony of mystics but also on her own firsthand mystical experiences.

Recognizing the profound limitations of a merely indirect approach to mysticism, some recent philosophers have drawn on their own spiritual practices and experiences as valuable data for arriving at a general theory of mystical experience. Forman, for instance, argues that "there is substantial evidence for PCEs" by appealing not only to the reports of other mystics but also to his own "autobiographical report" of his fleeting PCE in 1972.<sup>82</sup> Similarly, Jerome Gellman candidly admits that his conviction that God can be "known in experience" came about in part because of his own "mystic-like experiences."<sup>83</sup>

Sri Ramakrishna deserves to be recognized as a pioneer of this experiential method in the philosophical study of mysticism. He was a unique mystic in two key respects. First, he enjoyed an unusually wide range of mystical experiences, since he consciously set out to experience God in numerous forms and aspects through the practice of spiritual disciplines in both Hindu and non-Hindu

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81. Staal, *Exploring Mysticism*, 123–24.

82. Forman, "Introduction," 28. See also Robert Forman, "Pure Consciousness Events and Mysticism," *Sophia* 25.1 (1986), 49–58.

83. Jerome Gellman, *Experience of God and the Rationality of Theistic Belief* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), ix.

religious traditions. Second, Sri Ramakrishna belongs to a small minority of mystics who reflected philosophically on their own mystical experiences.

In this section, I will explore some of the far-reaching philosophical implications of Sri Ramakrishna's richly detailed accounts of his own mystical experiences of God.<sup>84</sup> In particular, I argue that his mystical testimony provides strong evidence that (1) divine visions count as genuine mystical experiences, (2) theistic experiences are phenomenologically distinct from Advaitic experiences, (3) some mystical experiences have both theistic and Advaitic elements, and (4) theistic and Advaitic mystical experiences have equal salvific value. In the course of my discussion, I will also show that neither perennialists nor constructivists are able to explain adequately some of the key features of Sri Ramakrishna's mystical experiences. In fact, as we will see in the next section, Sri Ramakrishna's unique and varied mystical experiences led him to propose a new conceptual paradigm for understanding the nature of mystical experience.

Just after being appointed priest of the Kālī Temple at Dakshineswar in 1855, Sri Ramakrishna received a Śakti mantra from Kenarām Bhaṭṭācārya and engaged in intensive spiritual practice with the aim of attaining the mystical realization of the Divine Mother Kālī (*LP* I.ii.58 / *DP* 205). Sri Ramakrishna conducted daily ritualistic worship of Kālī, sang devotional songs which would often send him into ecstasy, and spent many nights meditating on Kālī in a nearby jungle. At some point in 1856, he felt such intense despair about not yet having realized God that he reached for a sword in order to end his life. At that moment, he claimed he had a "marvelous vision of the Divine Mother" (*mār adbhūt darśan*) after which he lost external consciousness (*LP* I.ii.65 / *DP* 212). Upon regaining external consciousness, he felt a "steady flow of undiluted bliss" within him and "experienced the direct presence of the Divine Mother" (*mār sākṣāt prakāś upalabdhi koriyāchilām*) (*LP* I.ii.65 / *DP* 212). He later described his overwhelming experience as follows:

It was as if the room, doors, temple, and everything else vanished altogether; as if there were nothing anywhere! And I saw a boundless, infinite Conscious ocean of light [*ār dekhitechī ki, ek asīm ananta cetan jyotiḥ-samudra*]. However far and in whatever direction I looked, I saw shining waves [*ujjval ūrmimālā*], one after another, coming towards me to

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84. Sri Ramakrishna referred to the direct realization of God using a variety of Bengali words such as *upalabdhi* ("direct realization") (*LP* I.ii.65 / *DP* 212), *īśvar-lābh* ("attainment of God") (*K* 63 / *G* 114), *īśvar-darśan* ("vision of God") (*K* 63 / *G* 114), *sākṣātkār* ("direct realization") (*K* 92 / *G* 142), and *pratyakṣa-darśan* ("direct vision") (*K* 102 / *G* 151). These terms, all of which convey the directness and immediacy of the experience of God, justify my use of the English term "mystical" to describe Sri Ramakrishna's experiences of God.



swallow me up. They were madly rushing towards me from all sides, with a terrific noise. Very soon they were upon me, and they pushed me down into unknown depths. I panted and struggled and fell unconscious. (*LP* I.ii.65 / *DP* 212)

Notice the striking discrepancy between Sri Ramakrishna's pre-experiential religious practices and his mystical experience itself. By all indications, his religious practices prior to his first mystical experience of God consisted in the worship and contemplation of Kālī as the four-armed, dark-complexioned Divine Mother. However, to his surprise, he experienced the Divine Mother not as the four-armed Kālī but as an infinite ocean of Consciousness which finally engulfed him. Hence, Sri Ramakrishna's first mystical experience calls into question the constructivist view that a mystic's experiences are always conditioned by his or her pre-experiential concepts. Constructivists cannot account for surprising or novel mystical experiences, such as Sri Ramakrishna's first realization of the Divine Mother or Sri Aurobindo's unexpected Advaitic experience of the impersonal Ātman.

Significantly, Sri Ramakrishna's description of his first divine vision has both theistic and nontheistic elements. On the one hand, he referred to his experience as a vision of his "Mother" Kālī and he also uttered "Mother, Mother!" upon regaining external consciousness after his first vision (*LP* I.ii.66 / *DP* 212). On the other hand, he saw in his vision not a form of the personal God but an infinite ocean of Consciousness. Moreover, the fact that the waves of the infinite ocean engulfed him and he lost external consciousness suggests that his mystical experience was a unitive one in which his identity merged with the all-pervasive Divine Consciousness. Sri Ramakrishna's vision highlights, therefore, the limitations of philosophical attempts to categorize mystical experiences as *either* theistic *or* nontheistic.

Reflecting later on his unique state of mind after his first mystical realization of God, Sri Ramakrishna explained how that experience provided the impetus for all his subsequent religious practices and spiritual experiences:

One who lives near the sea sometimes has a desire to find out how many pearls are hidden in the ocean depths. Similarly, after realizing the Divine Mother and being constantly near Her, I wanted to experience the various aspects and forms of the Divine Mother, who has infinite aspects and infinite forms [*anantabhāvamayī anantarūpiṇī tāhāke nānābhāve o nānārūpe dekhibo*]. If I had a desire to see Her in a particular way, I would implore Her with a longing heart. Then the gracious Mother would supply whatever was necessary to experience that form or aspect, make me practise that *sādhana*, and reveal Herself to me accordingly [*sei bhāve dekhā*



*diten*]. Thus, I practised *sādhana*s belonging to various paths. (*LP* I.ii.160 / *DP* 304)

Significantly, Sri Ramakrishna's first experience of the Divine Mother as an infinite ocean of Consciousness revealed to him that She has "infinite aspects and infinite forms" (*anantabhāvamayī anantarūpiṇī*). After this first extraordinary experience, he was seized with an insatiable desire to experience the Infinite God in various forms and aspects by practicing the disciplines of different religious and spiritual paths. In other words, Sri Ramakrishna's first mystical experience of God left him with two incipient convictions. First, he became convinced that the conceptions of ultimate reality taught by the different religions, far from conflicting, actually correspond to complementary forms and aspects of one and the same Infinite Reality. This is none other than Sri Ramakrishna's doctrine of religious pluralism discussed at length in chapters 3 and 4. Second, he was convinced that the One Infinite God reveals Herself in various forms and aspects to mystics of different traditions and temperaments. This is Sri Ramakrishna's manifestationist model of mystical experience, which I will elaborate in the next section.

What is crucial to recognize is the stark difference between Sri Ramakrishna's direct experiential method and the indirect hermeneutic method of perennialists and constructivists, who arrive at their respective models of mystical experience by analyzing and comparing the testimony of mystics in different traditions. Sri Ramakrishna's initial conviction of the truth of manifestationism and religious pluralism was not an intellectual hypothesis based on textual analysis but a spiritual conviction based on his own direct experience of God. However, instead of remaining satisfied with this initial conviction, he proceeded to test and verify this conviction *experientially* by practicing the disciplines of different religious paths. On the cumulative basis of his many subsequent mystical experiences, he finally felt justified in accepting, and teaching to others, the view that the Infinite God manifests Herself to different mystics in various forms and aspects.

Shortly after realizing the Divine Mother as an infinite ocean of Consciousness, Sri Ramakrishna had an intense longing for a vision of the personal form of his beloved Kālī. He described this phase of his spiritual practice as follows: "Sometimes I would lose external consciousness from that unbearable agony [of longing for the Divine Mother]. Immediately after that I would see the Mother's Consciousness-laden form [*cinmayī mūrti*] as the Divine Bestower of Boons and Fearlessness! I used to see Her smiling, talking, consoling or teaching me in various ways!" (*LP* I.ii.66 / *DP* 213). It is highly significant that he describes Kālī's form as Her "*cinmayī mūrti*." The Bengali word *cinmayī* derives from the Sanskrit word *cit*, meaning Consciousness. Recall that he used the cognate adjective *cetan* to describe the infinite "ocean of light" he experienced in his first experience of God. In other words, he realized that the personal God Kālī

who was smiling and talking to him was a congealed form of the same infinite ocean of Saccidānanda he experienced in his first vision. His blissful visions of Kālī's personal form confirmed for him that the formless Infinite God actually manifests in various forms for Her devotees.

For the remainder of his life, Sri Ramakrishna enjoyed countless visions of divine forms. He reported having had two different types of divine visions: visions of divine forms with his eyes open and visions of divine forms in "*bhāvasamādhi*," a superconscious state of absorption in which he experienced loving union with the personal God.<sup>85</sup> An example of the first type was his vision of Caitanya's companions: "Once I saw the companions of Caitanya, not in a trance but with these very eyes. Formerly I was in such an exalted state of mind that I could see all these things with my naked eyes; but now I see them in *samādhi*. I saw the companions of Caitanya with these naked eyes" (*K* 319 / *G* 332). He also saw with his physical eyes numerous other divine forms, including Kālī "standing on the veranda . . . with Her hair blowing in the breeze" (*LP* I.ii.69 / *DP* 216), the luminous form of Sītā (*LP* I.ii.82–83 / *DP* 228), and the naughty Rāmlālā playing pranks with him (*LP* II.i.29–31 / *DP* 574–76).

Sri Ramakrishna also remarked that he had innumerable "visions of divine forms" (*rūp-darśan*) in *bhāvasamādhi* (*K* 471 / *G* 468). For instance, he describes an incident when he was taken to the zoo: "I went into *samādhi* at the sight of the lion, for the carrier of the Goddess [Durgā] awakened in my mind the consciousness of the Goddess Herself" (*K* 389 / *G* 391). In fact, various external sights, sounds, and even smells would often transport him into ecstatic states of *bhāvasamādhi*. Recalling the period of his Tantra *sādhana*, Sri Ramakrishna remarked: "Whenever I heard the word '*kāraṇa*' [which means both "wine" and "cause"] or smelled wine, I would realize the Cause of the universe, God, and lose external consciousness" (*LP* I.ii.117 / *DP* 264). He recounts a similar incident when he took a trip to the Maidan in Kolkata: "I noticed a young English boy leaning against a tree, with his body bent in three places. It at once brought before me the vision of Kṛṣṇa and I went into *samādhi*" (*K* 564 / *G* 546–47).

Sri Ramakrishna's divine visions during the course of his Islamic and Christian practices deserve special mention. In 1866, after suddenly being seized with the desire to practice Islamic *sādhana*, he took spiritual initiation from the Muslim Govinda Rāy. For three days, Sri Ramakrishna ate, dressed, and prayed in accordance with Islamic practice, repeated the name of Allah, and even stopped worshipping Hindu deities (*LP* I.ii.176 / *DP* 319). He remarked, "After three days of practice, I attained the spiritual goal of Islamic *sādhana*" (*LP* I.ii.176 / *DP* 319). After first having a "divine vision of a radiant Being who looked grave and

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85. See Sri Ramakrishna's descriptions of "*bhāvasamādhi*" at *K* 471 / *G* 468 and *K* 871 / *G* 812.

had a long beard,” he realized the “cosmic *saguṇa* Brahman and then his mind finally merged into the absolute *nirguṇa* Brahman” (*LP* I.ii.176 / *DP* 319). Sri Ramakrishna’s Islamic practice provided firsthand experiential confirmation of his conviction that the “infinitely sportive Divine Mother [*anantalīlāmayī mā*] has revealed Herself to many people through the path of Islam” (*LP* I.ii.176 / *DP* 319).

In 1874, he became interested in the path of Christianity. The devotee Śambhu Caraṇ Mallik would read to him from the Bible, which acquainted him with the holy life and teachings of Jesus. On one occasion, Sri Ramakrishna had a remarkable vision in the parlor of Jadulāl Mallik’s garden house while gazing intently at a picture of the child Jesus on his mother’s lap:

Just then he saw the picture become animate and luminous. Rays of light emanated from the bodies of Mother Mary and child Jesus, entering the Master’s heart and revolutionizing his mental attitudes. When he observed that his inborn Hindu impressions were vanishing from his mind and that different ones were arising, he tried to control himself by resisting them in various ways. He entreated the Divine Mother, saying, “Mother, what are You doing to me?,” but the onslaught continued. The waves of those impressions rose forcefully and completely submerged the Hindu bent of his mind. The Master’s love and devotion for Hindu gods and goddesses disappeared and his heart was filled with faith in and reverence for Jesus and his religion. He then had a vision of Christian clergymen offering incense and lights in front of the image of Jesus in a church, expressing their inner longing through prayer. (*LP* I.ii.211 / *DP* 356)

The fact that Sri Ramakrishna actively resisted the sudden Christian reconditioning of his Hindu mindset militates against the constructivist thesis that a mystic’s cultural and theological beliefs always shape his mystical experiences. In this case, the Christian mental reconditioning brought about by this divine vision was not only unexpected but unwanted. Nonetheless, this vision resulted in a radical transformation of his mind: his innate love for Hindu deities gave way, for a time, to an all-consuming devotion to Jesus.

After this remarkable experience, Sri Ramakrishna became so deeply absorbed in the thought of Jesus that he forgot to visit the Divine Mother in the Dakshineswar temple. He then had another divine vision after three days:

When the Master was walking in the Panchavati at the end of the third day [of his Christian mood], he saw a beautiful but unfamiliar God-man with a fair complexion advancing towards him, gazing at him steadily.

The Master immediately realized that he was a foreigner, and that he belonged to a different race. He saw that his eyes were large and beautiful, and though his nose was a little flat at the tip, it in no way marred the handsomeness of his face. The Master was charmed by the unique divine expression on his serene face and wondered who he could be. Very soon after that the figure drew near, and a voice from within told him, "This is Jesus Christ, the great *yogī*, the loving Son of God who is one with his Father, who shed his heart's blood and suffered torture for the salvation of humanity." Then the God-man Jesus embraced the Master and merged into him. In ecstasy, the Master lost external consciousness and his mind remained united with *saguṇa* Brahman for some time. With this vision, the Master became convinced that Jesus was truly a divine incarnation. (LP I.ii.211–12 / DP 357–58)

What began as a vision of Jesus with his eyes open culminated in a unitive experience in which Jesus merged into his body, resulting in *bhāvasamādhi*. Two features of Sri Ramakrishna's vision of Jesus pose a serious problem for constructivists. First, it is remarkable that he failed to recognize the handsome foreign person walking toward him. Although he had seen pictures of the adult Jesus many times in the past, the person he saw in his vision looked sufficiently different from those pictures that he could not even recognize the person as Jesus—until a "voice from within" informed him that it was, indeed, Jesus. Second, he saw Jesus with a flat nose, even though no picture of Jesus he had ever seen depicted him with a flat nose. Both these details rule out the possibility that Sri Ramakrishna's vision of Jesus was shaped by his pre-experiential assumptions about Jesus's appearance. More generally, the very fact that the Hindu Sri Ramakrishna had visions of Jesus challenges the widely held assumption that divine visions are culturally conditioned.<sup>86</sup>

It is also important to note that Sri Ramakrishna repeatedly emphasized the epistemically sui generis character of all his divine visions. Regarding his numerous visions of God with his eyes open, he explained: "God cannot be seen with these physical eyes. God gives one divine eyes [*divyacakṣu*], and only then can one behold Him" (K 141 / G 183). Although he often said that he had visions of God "with these very eyes," what he presumably meant is that the divine eyes granted to him by God enabled him to see God in the external world *through* his physical eyes. He reported that his visions of God in *bhāvasamādhi* were

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86. Hick claims, for instance, that "it is invariably a Catholic Christian who sees a vision of the Blessed Virgin Mary and a Vaishnavite Hindu who sees a vision of Krishna, but not *vice versa*" (*An Interpretation of Religion*, 166). See also William Wainwright, *Philosophy of Religion*, 2nd ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1999), 123.

also epistemically extraordinary: “In *samādhi* I lose external consciousness completely; but God generally keeps a little trace of the ‘I’ in me for the enjoyment of divine communion” (*K* 159 / *G* 196). These statements support Perovich’s objection to Katz’s constructivist thesis, which was mentioned in the previous section: Katz is mistaken in claiming that the ordinary discursive mind always operates in mystical experience, since many mystics themselves—including Sri Ramakrishna—insist that they experience God by means of a nondiscursive spiritual mode of knowledge that differs radically from ordinary cognition.

It is equally significant that Sri Ramakrishna consistently teaches that the Infinite Saccidānanda assumes various *objectively real* spiritual forms—what he calls “*cinmay rūp*” (*K* 181 / *G* 217) or “*cinmayī mūrtil*” (*LP* I.ii.66 / *DP* 213)—for the sake of His *bhaktas*. Sri Ramakrishna’s insistence on the fully objective reality of the objects of divine visions militates against both perennialism and constructivism. Stace, for instance, does not count divine visions as “genuine mystical experiences,” because visions involve “sensuous imagery,” while introvertive experience—which he considers to be the “most important type of mystical experience”—is strictly nonsensuous.<sup>87</sup> However, Stace’s dismissal of divine visions is both arbitrary and circular: since Stace narrowly defines mystical experience as the nonsensuous experience of undifferentiated unity, he dismisses visions of God as nonmystical. In stark contrast to perennialists such as Stace, Sri Ramakrishna conceives mystical experience as a much broader category that encompasses a wide variety of phenomenologically distinct experiences of God, including visions of divine forms.

If perennialists tend to dismiss divine visions as nonmystical, constructivists tend to view divine visions as subjective projections of the mystic’s own psyche. Hick, for instance, claims that “[t]he specific material out of which the vision is composed—the figure of an angel, or Christ, or Krishna, or Kali, or of a throne, a heart, a cloud—is supplied by the imagination and memory of the mystic.”<sup>88</sup> In contrast to constructivists, Sri Ramakrishna affirms that the objects of divine visions are ontologically real manifestations of God which mystics perceive by means of a nondiscursive spiritual faculty of knowledge.

Although Sri Ramakrishna had a strongly devotional temperament, he nonetheless had the desire to practice the nontheistic path of Advaita Vedānta in 1866. The itinerant Advaitin monk Totāpurī initiated Sri Ramakrishna into *sannyāsa* and taught him Advaitic philosophy and meditative techniques. After three days of practice, Sri Ramakrishna attained the realization of nondual Brahman in *nirvikalpa samādhi*. As Sri Ramakrishna put it, “all ideas and concepts [*vikalpa*]

87. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 47–49.

88. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 168.

disappeared from my mind, and it swiftly soared beyond the realm of name and form. I lost myself in *samādhi*" (LP I.ii.168 / DP 312). Toward the end of his three-day immersion in *nirvikalpa samādhi*, Totāpurī checked Sri Ramakrishna's vital signs and found that his body was "like a piece of dead wood" and that there was no heartbeat "or even the slightest trace of respiration" (LP I.ii.168 / DP 312). After Totāpurī left Dakshineswar, Sri Ramakrishna remained immersed in *nirvikalpa samādhi* for six months at a stretch, during which time his body was kept alive by a monk who would occasionally force a few morsels of food down his throat:

For six months at a stretch, I remained in that state [of *nirvikalpa samādhi*] from which ordinary men can never return; generally the body falls off, after three weeks, like a sere leaf. I was not conscious of day and night. Flies would enter my mouth and nostrils just as they do a dead body's, but I did not feel them. My hair became matted with dust. (LP I.iii.31 / DP 419–20)

Later in his life, on the basis of his Advaitic experiences, Sri Ramakrishna frequently emphasized that the mind entirely ceases to operate in the Advaitic state of *nirvikalpa samādhi*: "the mind first becomes steady, then it disappears altogether [*mon sthīr hoy, moner loy hoy*] and the aspirant goes into [*nirvikalpa samādhi*] and attains *brahmajñāna*" (K 83 / G 133). He invoked the metaphor of a salt doll to illustrate the transcendence of subject-object duality in *nirvikalpa samādhi*: "Once a salt doll went to measure the depth of the ocean. No sooner did it enter the water that it melted. Now who could tell how deep the ocean was? That which could have told about its depth had melted. Reaching the seventh plane, the mind is annihilated [*moner nās hoy*] and one attains *samādhi*" (K 121 / G 170). Sri Ramakrishna's descriptions of the Advaitic state of *nirvikalpa samādhi* strongly support Forman's argument that constructivists cannot explain the existence of Pure Consciousness Events, which do not involve conceptual mediation of any sort. For Sri Ramakrishna, since there is no subject-object duality and no mental activity whatsoever in the PCE state of *nirvikalpa samādhi*, there is no possibility of conceptual mediation. Constructivists such as Katz and Hick have to deny the self-understanding of numerous mystics, such as Sri Ramakrishna and Ramana Maharshi (1879–1950), who claim to have attained a nondual state beyond the reach of concepts.

Sri Ramakrishna not only enjoyed firsthand experience of both Advaitic *nirvikalpa samādhi* and theistic *bhāvasamādhi* but also reflected philosophically on both types of experience and explained precisely how they differ at the phenomenological level:

What is *samādhi*? It is the state in which the mind disappears entirely [*jekhāne moner loy hoy*]. The *jñānī* experiences *jaḍa samādhi*, in which no trace of “I” is left. The *samādhi* attained through the path of *bhakti* is called “*cetan-samādhi*.” In this *samādhi* there remains the consciousness of “I”—the “I” of the servant-and-Master relationship, of the lover-and-Beloved relationship, of the enjoyer-and-Food relationship. God is the Master; the devotee is the servant. God is the Beloved; the devotee is the lover. God is the Food, and the devotee is the enjoyer. “I don’t want to *be* sugar; I love to *eat* sugar.” (K 481 / G 478)

Sri Ramakrishna explains very clearly how Advaitic mystical experience differs from theistic mystical experience. In the case of Advaitic *nirvikalpa samādhi*—or, what he calls “*jaḍa samādhi*”—there is no trace of “I” whatsoever since subject-object duality is transcended. By contrast, in the case of theistic *cetan-samādhi*—or, what he elsewhere calls “*bhāvasamādhi*”<sup>89</sup>—the mystic’s non-egoistic “I” remains in order to enjoy loving communion with the personal God. Sri Ramakrishna’s precise description of the phenomenological difference between Advaitic and theistic mystical experience contradicts the view of perennialists such as Stace and Smart, who deny that theistic experience is a phenomenologically distinct type of mystical experience.<sup>90</sup> Both Zaehner and William Wainwright support Sri Ramakrishna’s position on this issue: mystical reports of theistic and monistic experiences, they claim, strongly suggest that these two types of unitive experience differ at the phenomenological level.<sup>91</sup> Indeed, Wainwright points out that the “most impressive evidence” for this position is that “several Eastern and Western theistic mystics (Ruysbroeck, Rāmānuja, and possibly Richard of St Victor and al-Junayd) create the impression that they have *themselves* experienced two types of introvertive consciousness, that they know what monistic experiences are like because they have had them, but that there is a clearly distinct introvertive experience which is theistic in character which they have also experienced and which is not to be confused with them.”<sup>92</sup> While I agree with Wainwright’s basic position, his examples of mystics who had both theistic and monistic experiences are questionable. Rāmānuja, for instance, outright denied the reality of Advaitic *nirguṇa* Brahman, so he did not accept the possibility

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89. See note 85.

90. See Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 66 and 74–75, and Smart, “Interpretation and Mystical Experience,” 84–86.

91. Zaehner, *Mysticism Sacred and Profane*, and Wainwright, *Mysticism*, 11–33.

92. Wainwright, *Mysticism*, 16.



of monistic experience.<sup>93</sup> Wainwright would have made a more convincing case if he had appealed instead to Sri Ramakrishna, who not only experienced both Advaitic *nirvikalpa samādhi* and theistic *bhāvasamādhi* but also explicitly affirmed that they are phenomenologically distinct types of mystical experience.<sup>94</sup>

After his six-month immersion in the Advaitic state of *nirvikalpa samādhi*, Sri Ramakrishna received a command from the Divine Mother: “Remain in *bhāvamukha*! Remain in *bhāvamukha* for the sake of humanity!” (*LP* I.iii.31 / *DP* 420). *Bhāvamukha* is a unique threshold state of consciousness in which one is aware simultaneously of the impersonal (*nirguṇa*) and personal (*saguṇa*) aspects of the Infinite Divine Reality.<sup>95</sup> In his later teachings, Sri Ramakrishna referred to this state of *bhāvamukha* as “*viññāna*.” As I discussed at length in chapter 1, the *viññāni* is a unique mystic who returns to the empirical plane after the attainment of *nirvikalpa samādhi*: “The *viññāni* sees that the Reality which is impersonal [*nirguṇa*] is also personal [*saguṇa*]. . . . Those who realize Brahman in *samādhi* come down also and find that it is Brahman that has become the universe and its living beings” (*K* 50–51 / *G* 103–4). According to Sri Ramakrishna, *viññāna* is a rarefied state of post-Advaitic *bhakti* in which one perceives everything in the universe as God and enjoys various forms of loving communion with Her. Upon receiving the divine command to remain in *bhāvamukha* in 1866, Sri Ramakrishna remained continuously in the spiritual state of *bhāvamukha* / *viññāna* until the end of his life. As he put it, “The Divine Mother has kept me in the state of a *bhakta*, a *viññāni*” (*K* 391 / *G* 393). He described his panentheistic experience of *viññāna* as follows: “God is not only inside us, but is both inside and outside! The Divine Mother showed me in the Kālī temple that everything is the Embodiment of Consciousness [*cinmay*]; that it is She who has become all this—the divine image [*pratimā*], myself, the utensils of worship, the door-sill, the marble floor” (*K* 532 / *G* 521).

He clarified his own state of *viññāna* by appealing to the Vedic *saptabhūmi* (“seven-plane”) paradigm: “On reaching the seventh plane of consciousness, the mind goes into [*nirvikalpa*] *samādhi*. . . . But I don’t want to become sugar; I love to eat sugar. I never feel like saying, ‘I am Brahman.’ I say, ‘Thou art my Lord and

93. See Swami Tapasyananda’s summary of Rāmānuja’s doctrine of Viśiṣṭādvaita in *Bhakti Schools of Vedānta* (Chennai: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1990), 31–84. For Rāmānuja, *ātmajñāna* is the realization not of nondual Brahman but of the individual soul (the *jīvātman*).

94. Wainwright could also have appealed to mystics in the traditions of Kāśmīri Śaivism, Tantra, and Śāktism, all of which accept both the impersonal and personal aspects of the Supreme Reality.

95. Both Svāmī Śarādānanda and Swami Tapasyananda have provided helpful discussions of Sri Ramakrishna’s state of *bhāvamukha*. See *LP* I.iii.56 / *DP* 447 and Swami Tapasyananda, *Sri Ramakrishna: Life and Teachings*, 60–74.



I am Thy servant.' It is good to make the mind go up and down between the fifth and sixth planes, like a boat racing between two points. I don't want to go beyond the sixth plane and keep my mind a long time in the seventh. My desire is to sing the name and glories of God" (*K* 123 / *G* 172). As a *vijñānī*, Sri Ramakrishna would move back and forth between the fifth plane, in which he would talk of the glories of God, and the sixth plane, in which he would lose external consciousness completely and experience various forms of the personal God in *bhāvasamādhi*. Moreover, he would also sometimes ascend to the seventh plane of Advaitic *nirvikalpa samādhi*, but he would not remain in that nondual state for long.

Sri Ramakrishna's unique state of *vijñāna* has extremely important implications for philosophical discourse on mysticism. Philosophers such as Stace, Smart, Zaehner, and Wainwright have proposed a variety of typologies of mystical experience. Both Stace and Smart maintain that there are only two basic types of mystical experience: the extrovertive experience of unity in nature and the deeper introvertive experience of pure undifferentiated unity. Hence, for Stace and Smart, theistic descriptions of mystical experience are, in fact, mistaken theistic *interpretations* of the nontheistic experience of undifferentiated unity. Zaehner, by contrast, proposes a broader typology of three distinct types of mystical experience: panentheic experience (which corresponds roughly to Stace's extrovertive experience), monistic experience (which corresponds to Stace's introvertive experience), and theistic experience, "in which the soul feels itself to be united with God by love."<sup>96</sup> Zaehner, from an avowedly Christian standpoint, argues that the "sacred" theistic experience of loving union with God is vastly superior to the "profane" monistic experience, which is nothing but a quietistic "state of complete tranquillity in emptiness."<sup>97</sup> Zaehner goes so far as to assert that "it is actually impossible to hold monistic and theistic opinions as both being *absolutely* true at one and the same time."<sup>98</sup>

Sri Ramakrishna's spiritual standpoint of *vijñāna*, however, directly challenges Zaehner's overhasty assumption. The *vijñānī*, who has enjoyed both the monistic experience of *nirvikalpa samādhi* and the theistic experience of loving communion with the personal God, realizes that the Infinite Reality has both personal and impersonal aspects that are equally real. Hence, while Sri Ramakrishna follows Zaehner in maintaining that monistic and theistic experiences are radically different types of mystical experience, he rejects Zaehner's normative assumption of the superiority of theistic to monistic experience. Moreover, Sri Ramakrishna characterizes *vijñāna* as a unique mystical state that involves both an introvertive

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96. Zaehner, *Mysticism Sacred and Profane*, 29.

97. Zaehner, *Mysticism Sacred and Profane*, 106.

98. Zaehner, *Mysticism Sacred and Profane*, xv.

awareness of the impersonal-personal Infinite Reality and an extrovertive realization that God has become everything in the universe. Hence, while philosophers such as Stace and Zaehner claim that extrovertive mystical experience is inferior to introvertive experience, Sri Ramakrishna maintains that the mystical experience of *vijñāna* has *both* introvertive and extrovertive elements as well as theistic and monistic elements.

Recently, Michael Stoeber has made a compelling case that an adequate mystical typology must accommodate not only theistic and monistic experiences but also “theo-monistic” experiences, which he defines as “realizations of a theistic nature that arise from transformative monistic unity.”<sup>99</sup> According to Stoeber, mystics in different traditions—including Eckhart, Ruysbroeck, Rāmānuja, and Sri Aurobindo—have had such theo-monistic experiences.<sup>100</sup> He explains theo-monistic experiences in terms of a Christian ontology according to which “there are various spiritual realities and different facets and forms of a personal Divine.”<sup>101</sup> Explicitly endorsing Zaehner’s thesis of the superiority of theistic to monistic experience, Stoeber claims that monistic mystics unknowingly experience the impersonal aspect of an ultimately personal God.<sup>102</sup>

From Sri Ramakrishna’s standpoint, while Stoeber rightly acknowledges a phenomenologically distinctive “theo-monistic” type of mystical experience, he narrowly interprets all theo-monistic experience in terms of a theistic ontology that takes God to be ultimately personal, thereby according greater salvific value to theistic experience than to monistic experience. In contrast to Stoeber, Sri Ramakrishna derives from his own theo-monistic experience of *vijñāna* a much more expansive Vedāntic philosophy according to which the Infinite Reality is *equally* personal and impersonal. Therefore, unlike Stoeber and Zaehner, Sri Ramakrishna grants equal salvific value to the monistic experience of nondual Brahman and the theistic experience of loving communion with a personal God.

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99. Stoeber, *Theo-Monistic Mysticism*, 23.

100. Stoeber does not provide strong evidence that mystics like Rāmānuja, Eckhart, and Ruysbroeck actually enjoyed theo-monistic experiences. In *Theo-Monistic Mysticism* (68), Stoeber refers briefly to Sri Ramakrishna’s teaching on the inseparability of Brahman and Śakti but overlooks its philosophical significance, perhaps because he fails to contextualize Sri Ramakrishna’s teachings within the philosophical framework of *vijñāna*.

101. Stoeber, *Theo-Monistic Mysticism*, 111.

102. Stoeber, *Theo-Monistic Mysticism*, 98. Stoeber’s position is similar to the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava conception of the Supreme Reality discussed in section I of chapter 2.

#### IV. A Reconstruction of Sri Ramakrishna's Manifestationist Model of Mystical Experience

Why have the world's mystics described the ultimate reality in so many different ways? Sri Ramakrishna, unlike most philosophers, arrived at a highly original answer to this question on the basis of his own spiritual experiences. After realizing both the impersonal nondual Brahman as well as numerous forms of the personal God, Sri Ramakrishna attained the expansive state of *vijñāna*, the realization that the Infinite Reality is at once personal and impersonal, with and without form, immanent in the universe and beyond it. As a *vijñānī*, Sri Ramakrishna championed a manifestationist theory of mystical experience: one and the same Infinite Reality *manifests* in innumerable forms and aspects to mystics of varying temperaments, preferences, and backgrounds. In this section, I will reconstruct the main tenets of Sri Ramakrishna's manifestationist account of mystical experience and argue that it has major advantages over both perennialism and constructivism.

We can begin to gain a deeper understanding of Sri Ramakrishna's manifestationist model of mystical experience by reminding ourselves of his favorite parable of the chameleon, which was already discussed in chapter 3 in the context of religious pluralism:

[O]ne who constantly thinks of God can know God's real nature; he alone knows that God manifests Himself to seekers in various forms and aspects [*tini nānārūpe dekhā den, nānābhāve dekhā den*]. God is *saguṇa* as well as *nirguṇa*. Only the man who lives under the tree knows that the chameleon can appear in various colors, and he knows, further, that the animal at times has no color at all. It is the others who suffer from the agony of futile argument. Kabīr used to say, "The formless Absolute [*nirākār*] is my Father, and God with form [*sākār*] is my Mother." God manifests Himself to the devotee in the form the devotee loves most; God's love for the devotee knows no bounds [*bhakta je rūṭi bhālobāse, seirūpe tini dekhā den—tini je bhakta-vatsal*]. It is written in the *Purāṇa* that God assumed the form of Rāma for His heroic devotee, Hanumān. (*K* 101 / *G* 149–50)

This parable, I would suggest, not only illustrates the harmony of all religions but also dramatizes Sri Ramakrishna's manifestationist model of mystical experience. Like the man sitting under the tree who sees that the chameleon appears in various colors and sometimes has no color at all, the *vijñānī* realizes that the impersonal-personal Infinite God "manifests Himself to seekers in various forms and aspects." Sri Ramakrishna also explains *why* God manifests in different ways to different mystics: since God is a "*bhakta-vatsal*" who has boundless love for His devotee, He "manifests Himself to the devotee in the form the devotee loves

most.”<sup>103</sup> This key principle of God as *bhakta-vatsal* explains why there is so often a close correlation between a mystic’s pre-experiential beliefs about God and the nature of the mystic’s subsequent experience of God. Constructivists, as we have seen, argue that this correlation implies causation: the mystic’s pre-experiential concepts *shape* the mystic’s experience. Sri Ramakrishna, by contrast, explains this correlation from the side of God rather than from the side of the mystic: God *reveals Himself* to each mystic in the form or aspect the mystic loves most. For Sri Ramakrishna, then, the cause of a given mystic’s particular experience of the ultimate reality is God Himself rather than the mystic’s subjective conceptual framework.

Sri Ramakrishna’s *bhakta-vatsal* principle has a wide range of applicability, since it explains many theistic and nontheistic mystical experiences in a variety of religious traditions. The Infinite God manifests to different theistic mystics in the particular personal forms they love and worship. For instance, when Sri Ramakrishna had an intense desire for a vision of his beloved four-armed Kālī, God manifested Himself to him in that very form (*LP* I.ii.66 / *DP* 213). When he later adopted the attitude of Kṛṣṇa’s consort Rādhā, God appeared to him in the forms of both Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa (*LP* I.ii.155–57 / *DP* 300–301). Likewise, when he adopted the servant attitude of Rāma’s great devotee Hanumān, God manifested to him in the form of Rāma’s beloved wife Sītā (*LP* I.ii.82 / *DP* 228–29). The *bhakta-vatsal* principle also readily explains the divine visions of other theistic mystics in various traditions. For example, since Saint Teresa worshipped Jesus and Mary, God often revealed Himself to her in the forms of Jesus and Mary.<sup>104</sup> When Swami Vivekananda was deeply absorbed in the contemplation of Śiva during his pilgrimage to the Amarnāth Temple, God revealed Himself to him in the form of Śiva.<sup>105</sup> Since many Jewish mystics in the tradition of Kabbalah devote themselves to loving contemplation of the *Sefiroth* (“Divine Emanations”), God often reveals Himself to them in the form of some aspect of the *Sefiroth*.<sup>106</sup>

Sri Ramakrishna’s *bhakta-vatsal* principle accounts not only for mystical visions of divine forms but also for ecstatic experiences of loving communion with the *formless* personal God. Eckhart describes a mystical experience in which

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103. Sri Ramakrishna refers to God as “*bhakta-vatsal*” at numerous places in the *Kathāmṛta*, including *K* 109 / *G* 157 and *K* 471 / *G* 468.

104. Teresa of Ávila, *The Life of Saint Teresa of Ávila by Herself*, trans. J. M. Cohen (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1958).

105. Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda: Mayavati Memorial Edition*, vol. 7 (Mayavati: Advaita Ashrama, 2005), 129.

106. Katz, “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism,” 34.

the soul “loses itself” in God, “like a drop of water poured into a tub of wine.”<sup>107</sup> Similarly, the Sufi mystic al-Ghazālī describes how the mystic “becomes naughted to himself” in the ecstatic experience of “union” with God.<sup>108</sup> The devotional hymns of the Sikh mystic Guru Nānak also frequently attest to his experiences of God as “*alakh*” (“formless”).<sup>109</sup> From Sri Ramakrishna’s perspective, the Infinite God grants the experience of union with His formless personal aspect to those theistic mystics who seek such a mystical union.

His *bhakta-vatsal* principle can also explain various nontheistic mystical experiences across religious traditions. Sri Ramakrishna explicitly invokes this principle when accounting for Advaitic mystical experiences: “[I]f a person seeks the Knowledge of Brahman, he can attain It even if he follows the path of *bhakti*. God, the *bhakta-vatsal*, can grant to the seeker the Knowledge of Brahman if He so chooses” (*K* 471 / *G* 468). From Sri Ramakrishna’s manifestationist standpoint, since Advaitic *jñānayogīs* constantly reason that the impersonal (*nirguṇa*) nondual Brahman alone is real, the impersonal-personal Infinite Reality accordingly reveals His *nirguṇa* aspect to Advaitic *jñānayogīs* in the state of *nirvikalpa samādhi*. Interestingly, he also adds that since God is a *bhakta-vatsal*, He can grant nondual realization even to non-Advaitic *bhaktas* who desire it.

Significantly, Sri Ramakrishna describes both positive and negative forms of Advaitic *jñānayoga*. The positive form of *jñānayoga* involves constant reflection on the philosophical doctrines of Advaita Vedānta—particularly the doctrine that “Brahman alone is real and this world of names and forms illusory” (*K* 101 / *G* 149–50). Under the guidance of his Advaitic guru Totāpurī, Sri Ramakrishna himself frequently practiced this positive form of *jñānayoga*. However, he also often described a negative form of *jñānayoga* that involves inquiring into the nature of one’s own self:

If one analyses oneself, one doesn’t find any such thing as “I.” Take an onion, for instance. First of all you peel off the red outer skin; then you find thick white skins. Peel these off one after the other, and you won’t find anything inside. In that state a man no longer finds the existence of his ego. And who is there left to seek it? Who can describe how he feels in that state—in his own Pure Consciousness—about the real nature of Brahman? (*K* 99 / *G* 148)

107. Cited in Richard Kieckhefer, “Meister Eckhart’s Conception of Union with God,” *Harvard Theological Review* 71.3–4 (July–October 1978), 215.

108. Cited in Zaehner, *Mysticism Sacred and Profane*, 158.

109. See, for instance, Guru Nānak’s description of God as “formless [*alakh*], infinite, unapproachable, imperceptible” in *Ang* 594, verse 4 of the *Guru Granth Sahib*.

The negative form of *jñānayoga* involves a process of self-inquiry in which we find that we are neither the body, nor the mind, nor the ego. The process is negative in the sense that it does not involve a prior acceptance of any positive philosophical doctrines about the true nature of the self, including even the Vedāntic doctrine of the nondual Ātman. Sri Ramakrishna's account of the negative form of *jñānayoga* helps explain why he considered the Buddha to be a *jñānayogī*. As I discussed in section III of chapter 3, Sri Ramakrishna believed that the Buddha's *nibbāna* experience was actually the Advaitic experience of his true nature as "Pure Consciousness" (*K* 1028 / *G* 947–48). Some scholars claim that the Buddha could not have been a Vedāntin since he subscribed to the doctrine of *anattā* ("nonself").<sup>110</sup> However, from Sri Ramakrishna's perspective, the Buddha's doctrine of *anattā* can be seen as rooted in the negative form of *jñānayoga*, a practice of critical self-inquiry that does not require belief in Upaniṣadic doctrines such as Ātman or Brahman.

If we understand the Buddha's spiritual practice in these terms, then it should hardly be surprising that the Buddha's description of *nibbāna* was also negative. As Sri Ramakrishna remarked, "Why should the Buddha be called an atheist? When one realizes one's *svarūpa* [the true nature of one's Self], one attains a state that is something between *asti* [is] and *nāsti* [is-not]" (*K* 1028 / *G* 947–48). Sri Ramakrishna makes the subtle point that the same ineffable Advaitic experience can be described and interpreted in either a positive or a negative manner. Advaitic mystics have tended to describe the highest experience in positive terms as "*brahmajñāna*" or "*ātmajñāna*." According to Sri Ramakrishna, however, the Buddha was equally justified in describing the same mystical experience in negative terms, since Pure Consciousness neither "is" nor "is not." As I discussed in chapter 3, numerous recent scholars have followed Sri Ramakrishna in defending a Vedāntic interpretation of the Buddha's *nibbāna* experience.<sup>111</sup> Although Sri Ramakrishna only refers to the Buddha's own experience of *nibbāna*, he likely would have claimed that later Buddhist mystics who attained *nibbāna* also experienced the same nondual Reality but sometimes interpreted their experience in a nonsubstantialist manner. In support of this Ramakrishnan position, some contemporary scholars like David Loy and Leesa Davis have argued that Buddhist mystics in various traditions—including Madhyamaka, Yogācāra, and

110. See, for instance, Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," 38–39.

111. For references, see note 48 of chapter 3. See also my discussion of the Buddha's *anattā* doctrine in section III of chapter 3.

Zen—experienced the same nondual Reality as Advaitic mystics but developed subtly different ontologies on the basis of their nondual experience.<sup>112</sup>

In fact, there is strong evidence that Sri Ramakrishna considered the experiences of nonduality in *all* religious traditions to be phenomenologically identical. His use of the analogy of a salt doll to convey the state of nondual experience has precisely this implication. Just as a salt doll melts into the ocean when it attempts to measure its depth, the mystic who experiences nondual Brahman in *nirvikalpa samādhi* transcends the mind and subject-object duality. Hence, nondual experience, by its very nature, leaves no scope for variation in its phenomenological content. According to Svāmī Sārādānanda, Sri Ramakrishna would sometimes convey the phenomenological identity of all nondualistic experience by means of a striking metaphor: “In that ultimate state, all jackals howl in the same way” (*LP* II.ii.24 / *DP* 742). From Sri Ramakrishna’s perspective, a Christian mystic’s experience of nonduality is phenomenologically identical to the nondual experience of a Buddhist mystic, an Advaitic mystic, a Sufi mystic, and so on. Therefore, his manifestationist principle of God as *bhakta-vatsal* is able to account for the nondual experiences of mystics in various traditions. According to Sri Ramakrishna, the Infinite God manifests His nondual impersonal nature to nontheistic mystics who practice either the positive or the negative form of *jñānayoga*. He also notes, however, that the same ineffable nondual experience can be interpreted and described in a variety of ways.

Sri Ramakrishna’s *bhakta-vatsal* principle also accounts for other types of nontheistic mystical experience, including the realization of the spiritual *jīvātman*.<sup>113</sup> In the context of the *saptabhūmi* paradigm, he remarks, “When the mind ascends to the fourth plane . . . it sees the *jīvātman* [the individual soul] as a flame, and it sees light. The spiritual aspirant then cries: ‘Ah! What is this? Ah! What is this?’” (*K* 214 / *G* 245). On the basis of his own mystical experience, Sri Ramakrishna observes that when the mind reaches the fourth plane of consciousness at the heart center, one realizes one’s true essence as the spiritual *jīvātman* apart from the body-mind complex.<sup>114</sup> Clearly, then, the realization of the *jīvātman* differs at the phenomenological level from the realization of nondual Brahman in *nirvikalpa samādhi*, which occurs on the seventh plane of consciousness. Sri Ramakrishna thereby accommodates the nontheistic philosophies of Jainism and

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112. David Loy, *Nonduality: A Study in Comparative Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 192–201; Leesa Davis, *Advaita Vedānta and Zen Buddhism* (London: Continuum, 2010), 7–8; Forman, “Introduction,” 39.

113. Of course, the realization of the *jīvātman* also plays an important role in some theistic philosophies, including Rāmānuja’s Viśiṣṭādvaita.

114. Sri Ramakrishna describes his own experiences of the *kuṇḍalinī* rising through the *suṣumnā* channel at *LP* I.ii.57 / *DP* 204 and *LP* I.ii.120 / *DP* 267.



Sāṃkhya, both of which conceive salvation as the state of “*kaivalya*” (literally, “isolation”) in which one realizes oneself as an individual spiritual entity—called the “*puruṣa*” in Sāṃkhya and the “*jīva*” in Jainism—that is separate from the psychophysical organism.<sup>115</sup> From Sri Ramakrishna’s perspective, the Infinite Divine Reality manifests to Jaina and Sāṃkhya mystics in the form of their own spiritual *jīvātman*.

In sum, Sri Ramakrishna’s manifestationist principle of God as *bhakta-vatsal* has a good deal of explanatory power, since it readily accounts for numerous kinds of mystical experience in both theistic and nontheistic religious traditions. The *bhakta-vatsal* principle explains, for instance, why the same Infinite God manifests to an Advaitic mystic as the impersonal nondual Brahman, to a Jaina mystic as her own *jīva*, to a Christian mystic as Jesus, and to a Śaivite mystic as Śiva. However, the *bhakta-vatsal* principle does *not* seem to be able to account for surprising or novel mystical experiences. For instance, as I mentioned earlier in the chapter, Sri Aurobindo had the Advaitic experience of *nirvikalpa samādhi* in spite of the fact that his pre-experiential spiritual practice and beliefs were resolutely *non-Advaitic*. Sri Ramakrishna himself first experienced God as an infinite ocean of Consciousness, even though he had been devoted to the personal God Kālī at the time. Likewise, the contemporary American mystic Bernadette Roberts was “surprised and bewildered” by her sudden nontheistic experience of “no-self,” because she was deeply committed to the Christian view that the self is a “being centred in God.”<sup>116</sup> Examples of such unexpected mystical experiences can easily be multiplied.<sup>117</sup>

Sri Ramakrishna accounts for such surprising and novel mystical experiences by appealing to another manifestationist principle—namely, the principle of God as “*icchāmayī*” (“the One who does everything at His pleasure”)—which complements his *bhakta-vatsal* principle. For instance, he invokes the principle of God as *icchāmayī* in order to explain why the Infinite God sometimes grants the realization of the impersonal nondual Brahman even to theistic *bhaktas* who have no desire to lose their individuality in Brahman:

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115. See Jeffery D. Long, *Jainism: An Introduction* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009) and Gerald James Larson, *Classical Sāṃkhya: An Interpretation of its History and Meaning* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1979).

116. Bernadette Roberts, *The Experience of No-Self* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), 10. Forman mentions Roberts’s mystical experience in *The Problem of Pure Consciousness* (20).

117. For instance, Jones mentions the case of Simone Weil, who was an “agnostic Marxist from a Jewish family who resisted the mystical experiences she was having but ended up converting to Christianity” (*Philosophy of Mysticism*, 64).

The *bhakta* wants to realize the Personal God endowed with form and talk to Him. He seldom seeks the Knowledge of Brahman. But God, who does everything at His pleasure [*icchāmayi*], can make His devotee the heir to His infinite glories if it pleases Him. He gives His devotee both the Love of God and the Knowledge of Brahman. (*K* 471 / *G* 468)

Since God is *icchāmayi*, He sometimes chooses to manifest Himself in a form or aspect that the mystic neither expects nor perhaps even wishes to realize.<sup>118</sup> This explains why God sometimes grants the Advaitic knowledge of Brahman to *bhaktas*—such as Sri Aurobindo—who do not seek such knowledge. Sri Ramakrishna also mentions the example of the *gopīs*, the cowherd girls who were intoxicated with love for the personal God Kṛṣṇa: “The *gopīs* of Vrindavan, too, attained the Knowledge of Brahman; but they were not seeking It. They wanted to enjoy God, looking on themselves as His mother, His friend, His handmaid, or His lover” (*K* 505 / *G* 501).

In another passage, Sri Ramakrishna further elaborates the principle of God as *icchāmayi* in the context of some of his own surprising mystical experiences:

The Divine Mother has taught me everything. Oh, how many things She has shown me! One day She showed me Śiva and Śakti everywhere. . . . Śiva and Śakti existing in all living things—people, animals, trees, plants. . . . Another day I was shown heaps of human heads, mountain high. Nothing else existed, and I was seated alone in their midst. Still another day She showed me an ocean. Taking the form of a salt doll, I was going to measure its depth. While doing this, through the grace of the guru I was turned to stone. Then I saw a ship and at once got into it. The helmsman was the guru. . . . These are all deep mysteries. . . . You will realize everything when God Herself teaches you. Then you will not lack any knowledge. (*K* 373 / *G* 376–77)

Notice that Sri Ramakrishna did not seek or expect any of the experiences he describes here. According to Sri Ramakrishna, God as *icchāmayi* is the Divine Teacher who sometimes chooses to reveal aspects or forms of Herself that will most benefit the seeker spiritually. This principle of God as *icchāmayi* explains the unexpected mystical experiences not only of Sri Ramakrishna himself but also of numerous mystics in both theistic and nontheistic religious traditions. In the case of Roberts and Sri Aurobindo, for instance, the *icchāmayi* God chose to

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118. Sri Ramakrishna refers to God as “*icchāmayi*” or “*icchāmayī*” at numerous places in the *Kathāmṛta*, including *K* 316 / *G* 329, *K* 501 / *G* 501, and *K* 378 / *G* 381.

grant them nontheistic mystical experiences for their own spiritual benefit, even though both of them had strongly theistic leanings. Likewise, the *icchāmayi* God granted to R. M. Bucke the experience of “cosmic consciousness,” even though he was not seeking any kind of religious or mystical experience at the time.<sup>119</sup>

I would argue that Sri Ramakrishna’s manifestationist paradigm—based on the complementary principles of God as *bhakta-vasal* and God as *icchāmayi*—shares the main advantages of both perennialism and constructivism but lacks their respective limitations and weaknesses. His manifestationist paradigm honors the core perennialist intuition that there is a common core to all mystical experience. Unlike perennialists, however, Sri Ramakrishna locates this mystical common core at the ontological, rather than the phenomenological, level. All mystical experiences, Sri Ramakrishna maintains, have as their object one and the same impersonal-personal Infinite Reality. Since he affirms that the Infinite Reality manifests to different mystics in *different* forms and aspects, he emphatically rejects the thesis of a phenomenological common core held by perennialists such as Stace and Smart. The primary weakness of perennialism is its inability to account for the fact that the experiences of mystics in various traditions—and even within a particular tradition—often differ quite dramatically. The notorious perennialist strategy of ascribing most of the differences in mystical reports to differences in *interpretations* of the same underlying experience seems both unjustified and ad hoc. As Katz, Zaehner, and others have convincingly shown, there is overwhelming evidence, for instance, that theistic mystical experience differs at the phenomenological level from the nontheistic experience of nondual Brahman.<sup>120</sup> Sri Ramakrishna’s manifestationist paradigm is able to honor the very real phenomenological differences among various types of mystical experience while at the same time affirming an ontological common core of all mystical experience.

As we have seen, however, Sri Ramakrishna does hold that all *nondual* mystical experiences are phenomenologically identical. Recently, Forman has defended a very similar view. According to Forman, since a PCE is devoid of all concepts and images, “a formless trance in Buddhism may be experientially indistinguishable from one in Hinduism or Christianity.”<sup>121</sup> Sri Ramakrishna appeals to something very much like the perennialist distinction between experience and interpretation in order to assimilate the Buddha’s experience of *nibbāna*

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119. R. M. Bucke, *Cosmic Consciousness: A Study in the Evolution of the Human Mind* (Philadelphia: Innes & Sons, 1901), 6–8. See also Forman’s discussion of Bucke’s unexpected experience of cosmic consciousness in “Introduction,” 20.

120. See Zaehner, *Mysticism Sacred and Profane*, and Katz, “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism.”

121. Forman, “Introduction,” 39.

to Advaitic experience. The Buddha's experience of *nibbāna*, Sri Ramakrishna claims, was an experience of nondual Pure Consciousness which the Buddha did not interpret as such. Crucially, however, Sri Ramakrishna, like Forman, only appeals to the experience-interpretation distinction in order to account for the phenomenological identity of specifically *nondual* mystical experiences across religious traditions. By contrast, perennialists such as Stace and Smart appeal to the experience-interpretation distinction in a much more sweeping manner in order to explain away all or most of the apparent differences among mystical experiences in general.

Like constructivists, Sri Ramakrishna maintains that there is a wide variety of mystical experiences that differ at the phenomenological level. Constructivists, however, account for this diversity of mystical experiences by claiming that the mystic's pre-experiential concepts shape her mystical experiences. Sri Ramakrishna, by contrast, maintains that mystical experiences vary because the Infinite God manifests Himself in different aspects and forms to mystics of varying backgrounds and temperaments. Sri Ramakrishna's manifestationist paradigm has two major advantages over constructivism. First, Sri Ramakrishna is not committed to the problematic constructivist assumption that the best way to account for the frequently observed correlation between a mystic's pre-experiential concepts and the nature of her subsequent mystical experiences is to assume a causal connection between them. Constructivists, I have argued, are unable to account for two significant types of mystical experience found in multiple religious traditions: namely, PCEs and surprising or novel mystical experiences. By contrast, Sri Ramakrishna's manifestationist paradigm accounts for both these types of mystical experience on the basis of a *noncausal* explanation of the correlation between a mystic's pre-experiential concepts and her mystical experiences. Therefore, his manifestationist paradigm has greater explanatory power than the causal account favored by constructivists. Second, constructivists, as we have seen, adopt a subjectivist epistemology that results in an ontologically deflationary account of the divine object of mystical experience. For constructivists such as Katz and Hick, the divine reality a mystic claims to have experienced is at least partly a product of the mystic's own mind. For Sri Ramakrishna, by contrast, mystics experience *objectively real* manifestations of one and the same Infinite Reality.

Sri Ramakrishna's manifestationist paradigm also has methodological and hermeneutic advantages over both perennialism and constructivism. As we saw in the previous section, perennialists and constructivists tend to rely on an indirect interpretive method of comparing the testimony of mystics in different traditions. However, I have argued that philosophers who have themselves enjoyed mystical experiences are in a far better epistemic position than nonmystic philosophers to determine the nature and phenomenology of mystical experience. Since Sri Ramakrishna had direct first-person access to a variety of mystical experiences,

he was in an optimal epistemic position to make philosophical claims about mystical experience. Therefore, at the methodological level, Sri Ramakrishna's manifestationist paradigm has a considerable advantage over both perennialism and constructivism.

From a hermeneutic standpoint, the most plausible philosophical theory of mystical experience is one that provides the most convincing and comprehensive explanation of why mystics in different traditions describe their experiences in such a wide variety of ways. Taken collectively, the reports of mystics in various traditions strongly suggest that (1) mystical experiences frequently differ at the phenomenological level, (2) most mystics take their experiences to be epistemically *sui generis* in character, and (3) most mystics take the divine objects of their experience to have fully objective reality.<sup>122</sup> Perennialists deny (1), since they maintain that mystics' *interpretations* of their experiences often differ but that the experiences themselves do not. Constructivists, on the other hand, deny both (2) and (3). Against (2), constructivists maintain that mystical experiences are always mediated by concepts in precisely the same way that ordinary cognitive experiences are. Against (3), constructivists claim that the divine realities allegedly experienced by mystics do not have fully objective reality, since they are at least partly a product of the mystics' own conceptual frameworks.

Therefore, although both perennialists and constructivists claim to be maximally faithful to mystical testimony, they nonetheless deny key elements in the self-understanding of most mystics.<sup>123</sup> Sri Ramakrishna, by contrast, fully accepts (1), (2), and (3). In accordance with (1), he maintains that the experiences of mystics vary significantly at the phenomenological level because the Infinite Reality manifests in different forms and aspects to different mystics. In accordance with (2), he claims that mystical experience involves a special faculty of

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122. Katz provides compelling and extensive evidence for (1) in "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism" and in his edited volume, *Comparative Mysticism: An Anthology of Original Sources* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). A strong case for (2) is made in Perovich, "Does the Philosophy of Mysticism Rest on a Mistake?," 244–50. William James was one of the first philosophers to defend (3). See his important discussion of the "noetic" quality of mystical experience in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Penguin, [1902] 1985), 380–81. More recent philosophers who have defended (3) include Richard Swinburne, William Alston, and Gellman, among many others. See Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 293–327; Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994); Gellman, *Experience of God and the Rationality of Theistic Belief*.

123. Katz rather presumptuously claims that his constructivist account does not overlook "any evidence" ("Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," 66). In fact, I have argued that his account overlooks the overwhelming evidence in mystical reports that mystical experiences are epistemically *sui generis* and that mystics usually take the divine objects of their experiences to have full ontological reality.

nondiscursive spiritual knowledge which differs radically from ordinary cognition. In accordance with (3), he maintains that all the various manifestations of the Infinite Reality experienced by mystics have full ontological reality. Since Sri Ramakrishna honors all three key features of mystical testimony across religious traditions, his manifestationist paradigm has a significant hermeneutic advantage over both perennialism and constructivism.

## V. Anticipating a Possible Objection

Philosophers such as Katz and John Fenton have criticized approaches to mystical experience based on a *philosophia perennis*, such as the approaches of Aldous Huxley and Frithjof Schuon.<sup>124</sup> According to Fenton, attempts to interpret the experiences of mystics in terms of a *philosophia perennis* suffer from two serious drawbacks: first, they fail to honor the diversity of mystical experiences across traditions, and second, they overlook the fact that mystics often derive *conflicting* theologies and philosophies on the basis of their respective mystical experiences.<sup>125</sup> As Fenton puts it, “The attempt to bypass metaphysical and theological differences among the mystical traditions by treating mystical experiences as subconceptual feeling, emotion, or aesthetics—or as transconceptual intuitions of the ‘same’ ultimate reality—is both initially and ultimately to be false to the data.”<sup>126</sup> Could it not be argued that Sri Ramakrishna’s manifestationist model of mystical experience is vulnerable to Fenton’s objection, since it is based on the *philosophia perennis* of Vijñāna Vedānta?

Sri Ramakrishna, I would suggest, is immune to this objection because of certain unique features of his approach to mystical experience. It is important to note, first of all, that not all perennial philosophies are the same, so Fenton’s objection may apply to certain forms of perennial philosophy but not to others.<sup>127</sup> For instance, Radhakrishnan champions a neo-Advaitic perennial philosophy, according to which all mystics have the same experience of the impersonal

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124. Some defenses of a perennial philosophy include Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1947), Frithjof Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (Wheaton, IL: Quest Books, 1984), and Huston Smith, *Forgotten Truth: The Common Vision of the World’s Religions* (New York: HarperCollins, 1976). For criticisms of appeals to a perennial philosophy, see Katz, “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism,” 24 and John Fenton, “Mystical Experience as a Bridge for Cross-Cultural Philosophy of Religion: A Critique,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 49.1 (March 1981), 51–76.

125. Fenton, “Mystical Experience as a Bridge,” 67.

126. Fenton, “Mystical Experience as a Bridge,” 67.

127. Fenton mistakenly assumes that all perennialist philosophies take all mystical experiences to be the same. See Fenton, “Mystical Experience as a Bridge,” 67 n. 1.

nondual Ātman but interpret their experience in different ways. Underhill, by contrast, adopts a theistic perennial philosophy that conceives the universal mystical experience as loving communion with a personal God. Stace, meanwhile, champions a “pantheistic” perennial philosophy that leads him to argue that all introvertive mystical experience is an experience of pure undifferentiated unity that some mystics wrongly interpret in theistic terms. Therefore, Fenton’s objection does seem to apply to the perennial philosophies of Radhakrishnan, Underhill, and Stace, all of whom hold that mystical experiences are more or less the same across traditions.

However, I would argue that Fenton’s objection does *not* apply to Sri Ramakrishna’s unique perennial philosophy of Vijñāna Vedānta, which explicitly accommodates a diversity of mystical experiences and metaphysical outlooks. According to Sri Ramakrishna, while no one can experience the *whole* of the Infinite God, different people can experience different real forms or aspects of God.<sup>128</sup> As we saw in chapter 3, his parables of the chameleon and of the blind men and the elephant illustrate how different religions and spiritual philosophies capture different aspects and forms of one and the same Infinite Reality. Crucially, however, Sri Ramakrishna also takes these parables to illustrate the complementarity of different mystical experiences of God. For instance, when someone asked him, “Why are there so many conflicting views on the nature of God?” he replied: “Each devotee forms his view of God on the basis of how he experiences, or prefers to think of, God [*je bhakta jerūp dekhe, se seirūp mone kore*]. In reality, however, different views of God do not conflict” (*K* 100 / *G* 149). Immediately after saying this, Sri Ramakrishna proceeded to recite the chameleon parable, which shows that the Infinite God “manifests Himself in various forms and aspects” to mystics of differing temperaments and backgrounds (*K* 101 / *G* 150).

Sri Ramakrishna’s statement clearly indicates that various mystics have *different* experiences of one and the same Infinite Reality. Since some mystics wrongly assume that what they have experienced of the ultimate reality exhausts its nature, they end up espousing conflicting views of the ultimate reality on the basis of their limited mystical experiences. For instance, an Advaitic mystic who experiences nondual Brahman in *nirvikalpa samādhi* may be led to assume that the ultimate reality is only impersonal. By contrast, a theistic mystic who experiences loving communion with a personal God may assume that God is only personal. According to Sri Ramakrishna, only the *vijñānī*—who has experienced God as *both* personal and impersonal, *both* with and without form—realizes that different mystics experience complementary aspects of the same Infinite Reality.

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128. Section I of chapter 3 discusses this idea in detail.



Therefore, Sri Ramakrishna's *viññāna*-based manifestationist paradigm, which explicitly denies that all mystical experiences are phenomenologically identical, is not vulnerable to Fenton's sweeping critique of perennial philosophies in general.

A great virtue of Sri Ramakrishna's manifestationist paradigm is that it is both dynamic and expandable. As he puts it, "No one can put a limit [*iti*] to the experience of God. If you refer to one experience, there is another beyond that, and still another, and so on" (*īśvarīya avasthār iti karā jāi na. tāre bāḍā tāre bāḍā āche*) (*K* 658 / *G* 624). Sri Ramakrishna's use of "*iti*" here should remind us of his frequent teaching—discussed in chapter 2—that no one can put an *iti* ("limit" or "end") to the Infinite God.<sup>129</sup> His use of the same word *iti* in the context of mystical experiences of God is telling: since God is infinite, there are potentially infinite experiences of God as well.

In a recent edited tome, Katz has attempted to show that the testimony of mystics from seven major religious traditions supports his own constructivist view.<sup>130</sup> To refute Katz, we would have to engage in a similarly full-scale examination of the world's diverse mystical literature and show that it lends greater support to Sri Ramakrishna's manifestationist paradigm than to Katz's constructivist paradigm. While such an ambitious research project is well beyond the scope of this chapter, I hope philosophers will explore further how Sri Ramakrishna's unique approach to mystical experience can help us move beyond the familiar alternatives of perennialism and constructivism.

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129. See, for instance, *K* 152 / *G* 192 and *K* 422 / *G* 422–23.

130. Katz, ed., *Comparative Mysticism*.

## 6

A CROSS-CULTURAL DEFENSE OF THE  
EPISTEMIC VALUE OF MYSTICAL  
EXPERIENCESRI RAMAKRISHNA, SELF-AUTHENTICATION,  
AND THE ARGUMENT FROM EXPERIENCE

The previous chapter argued that Sri Ramakrishna's manifestationist paradigm provides a more nuanced and methodologically rigorous account of the nature of mystical experience than the familiar paradigms of perennialism and constructivism. This chapter focuses on the epistemology of mystical experience, which concerns questions about the veridicality of putative mystical experiences. Is a mystic rationally justified in believing that she has had a veridical experience of God? And are we *non*mystics rationally justified in believing that a mystic's putative experience of God is veridical?<sup>1</sup>

The stakes of these epistemic questions are high. If we are rationally warranted in thinking that mystics' putative experiences of God are veridical, then these experiences would count as substantial evidence in favor of the existence of God. Numerous recent philosophers of religion—including Richard Swinburne, Jerome Gellman, and William Alston—have defended the epistemic and evidential value of experiences of God.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, philosophers such as Evan Fales and

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1. For the remainder of this chapter, whenever I refer to “mystical experience” or a mystic’s “experience of God,” I mean a *putative* mystical experience, though I will often omit the word “putative” in order to avoid repetition. Therefore, the phrases “mystical experience” and “experience of God,” as I employ them, do not entail the veridicality of the experience.

2. Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 293–327; William Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991); Jerome Gellman, *Experience of God and the Rationality of Theistic Belief* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); Gary Gutting, *Religious Belief and Religious Skepticism* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983); Keith Yandell, *The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

Richard Gale have questioned the epistemic credentials of mystical experience on various grounds.<sup>3</sup> This chapter explores how Sri Ramakrishna's mystical testimony and teachings can enrich contemporary debates about the epistemic value of mystical experience.

Section I of this chapter briefly sketches Sri Ramakrishna's views on the scope of theological reason. While he maintains that no rational proofs or disproofs of God's existence could ever be decisive, he suggests that certain arguments in favor of God's existence have some degree of rational force. Section II reconstructs Sri Ramakrishna's stance on the question of whether self-authenticating experiences of God—that is, experiences of God that guarantee their own veridicality to their epistemic subjects—are possible. Sri Ramakrishna's mystical testimony, I suggest, lends strong support to Robert Oakes's position that self-authenticating experiences of God are logically possible and that many mystics claimed to have had such self-authenticating experiences. According to Sri Ramakrishna, the highest theistic and Advaitic experiences are self-authenticating, while other experiences of God may or may not be self-authenticating.

Many contemporary philosophers have discussed the so-called argument from experience, the argument for God's existence based on the fact that some people claim to have experienced God. Sections III through V of this chapter examine different facets of the argument from experience in the light of Sri Ramakrishna. In section III, I argue that Sri Ramakrishna defended a simple form of the argument from experience and that his teachings and mystical testimony support the key premises of the more sophisticated argument from experience defended by contemporary philosophers. Sections IV and V address, respectively, two of the most serious objections to the argument from experience. Section IV addresses the common objection that mystical experiences, unlike sensory experiences, cannot be adequately cross-checked. Drawing on Alston's sophisticated response to this objection, I defend the epistemic force of many of the cross-checking procedures employed by Sri Ramakrishna and other mystics to determine the veridicality of their mystical experiences. Finally, section V addresses the objection that mystical experiences are epistemically suspect since different mystics have made conflicting claims about the nature of the ultimate reality on the basis of their experiences. While Gellman and William Wainwright offer promising responses to the conflicting claims objection, I argue that their positions can be considerably strengthened by appealing to Sri Ramakrishna's mystical experiences and teachings.

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3. For references, see note 48 below.

## I. Sri Ramakrishna's Critique of Theological Reason

There are a wide range of views on the relationship between faith and reason. At one extreme lies evidentialism, the view that faith in God's existence is reasonable only if there is sufficient evidence to support it.<sup>4</sup> Richard Swinburne, for instance, makes the case that the cumulative evidence for God's existence—as established by various rational arguments—makes it more probable than not that God exists.<sup>5</sup> At the other extreme lies irrationalist fideism, the view that faith in God's existence *contradicts* reason. Tertullian and Søren Kierkegaard, for instance, have sometimes been interpreted as claiming that we should have faith in certain religious truths which appear absurd to human reason.<sup>6</sup>

Between these extremes of evidentialism and irrationalist fideism lies what C. Stephen Evans calls “responsible fideism.”<sup>7</sup> According to the responsible fideist, reason is inherently limited, so it can neither prove nor disprove God's existence in a conclusive manner. Nonetheless, the responsible fideist maintains that religious faith can be aided by a “self-critical” reason that recognizes its own limitations.<sup>8</sup> Evans highlights three main uses of such a self-critical reason. First, we can employ reason in order to show that “it is reasonable to recognise the limits of reason.”<sup>9</sup> Second, we can bolster our faith by providing rational refutations of arguments *against* God's existence.<sup>10</sup> Third, while arguments in support of God's existence are not likely to convince a religious skeptic, such rational arguments

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4. Evidentialists include W. K. Clifford, Bertrand Russell, Antony Flew, and Richard Swinburne. See W. K. Clifford, “The Ethics of Belief,” in W. K. Clifford, *Lectures and Essays*, vol. 2 (London: Macmillan, 1879), 177–211; Bertrand Russell, “Why I Am Not a Christian,” in Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian* (London: Routledge, 2004), 1–19; Antony Flew, *The Presumption of Atheism* (London: Pemberton, 1976), 22ff.; Richard Swinburne, *Faith and Reason*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 15–24; Richard Swinburne, “Evidentialism,” in *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, 2nd ed., ed. Charles Taliaferro, Paul Draper, and Philip L. Quinn (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 681–88.

5. Swinburne, *The Existence of God*.

6. See the helpful discussion of Tertullian and Kierkegaard in C. Stephen Evans, *Faith Beyond Reason: A Kierkegaardian Account* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1998), 10–14.

7. Evans, *Faith Beyond Reason*, 114–25. There are, of course, many other intermediate positions between evidentialism and irrationalist fideism besides responsible fideism, including Alvin Plantinga's reformed epistemology and Duncan Pritchard's “quasi-fideism.” See Plantinga, “Reason and Belief in God,” in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 16–93, and Pritchard, “Faith and Reason,” *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 81 (2017), 101–18.

8. Evans, *Faith Beyond Reason*, 14.

9. Evans, *Faith Beyond Reason*, 14.

10. Evans, *Faith Beyond Reason*, 127.

can nonetheless strengthen a religious believer's faith in God. As Evans puts it, "There may be evidence that can only be seen as evidence by the eyes of faith, but such evidence might still be important for those who have those eyes of faith."<sup>11</sup>

Sri Ramakrishna, I suggest, is best understood as a responsible fideist. As we saw in the discussion of VV2 in section III of chapter 1, Sri Ramakrishna never tired of emphasizing the fundamental limitations of the rational intellect. He would frequently ask the rhetorical question, "Can a one-seer pot hold four seers of milk?" (*K* 934 / *G* 864). Moreover, he enthusiastically endorsed William Hamilton's fideistic statement that "a learned ignorance is the end of philosophy and the beginning of religion" (*K* 255 / *G* 278). For Sri Ramakrishna, reason can play a valuable role in helping us arrive at a state of "learned ignorance," a humble acknowledgment of the limitations of reason, which would clear a space for *supra*-rational faith in God's existence. Sri Ramakrishna's endorsement of a learned ignorance brings him close to Kant, who famously sought to "deny knowledge in order to make room for faith."<sup>12</sup> (Indeed, Hamilton was profoundly influenced by the fideistic strain in Kant's thought.)<sup>13</sup>

As a responsible fideist, Sri Ramakrishna frequently employed reason in order to refute arguments against God's existence. For instance, as we will see in the next chapter, he refuted arguments from evil by combining a skeptical theist position with a sophisticated theodicy. Moreover, while Sri Ramakrishna was clearly skeptical of the pretensions of natural theology, he nonetheless believed that rational arguments for God's existence can strengthen one's religious faith. Take, for instance, the following dialogue between Sri Ramakrishna and the devotee Śrīś:

ŚRĪŚ: "Sir, I feel that there is an All-knowing Person. We get an indication of His Knowledge by looking at His creation. Let me give an illustration. God has made devices to keep fish and other aquatic animals alive in cold regions. As water grows colder, it gradually shrinks. But the amazing thing is that, just before turning into ice, the water becomes light and expands. In the freezing cold, fish can easily live in the water of a lake: the surface of the lake may be frozen, but the water below is all liquid. If a very cool breeze blows, it is obstructed by the ice. The water below remains warm."

SRI RAMAKRISHNA: "That God exists may be known by looking at the universe. But it is one thing to hear of God, another thing to see God, and still another

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11. Evans, *Faith Beyond Reason*, 111.

12. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 117.

13. See, for instance, Hamilton's frequent references to Kant in his book *Lectures on Metaphysics and Logic*, vol. 1 (Boston: Gould & Lincoln, 1859).

thing to talk to God. Some have heard of milk, some have seen it, and some, again, have tasted it. You feel happy when you see milk; you are nourished and strengthened when you drink it. You will get peace of mind only when you have seen God. You will enjoy bliss and gain strength only when you have talked to Him.” (*K* 362 / *G* 368)

Śrīś sketches a teleological argument for God’s existence: certain features of the natural world—such as the existence of natural mechanisms to keep fish alive in cold areas—strongly suggest that the world was created by an omniscient and omnipotent God. In response to Śrīś’s argument, Sri Ramakrishna acknowledges that one endowed with the eyes of faith may indeed see God’s handiwork “by looking at the universe.” However, he also points out that no such rational arguments are ever conclusive, so the only way to attain unshakable certainty of God’s existence is to experience God directly.<sup>14</sup> I suspect that Sri Ramakrishna would have endorsed John Hick’s view that the universe is “religiously ambiguous” in that there is more or less equal evidence to support both religious and naturalistic interpretations of the universe.<sup>15</sup> Like Evans, Sri Ramakrishna maintains that the teleological argument can strengthen a religious believer’s faith in God, even if the argument is not likely to convince a religious skeptic.

Interestingly, Sri Ramakrishna himself frequently appealed to one argument for God’s existence in particular—namely, the argument from experience. As he puts it, “He who seeks God with a longing heart can see Him, talk to Him as I am talking to you. I am telling you the truth: God can be seen. But ah! To whom am I saying these words? Who will believe me?” (*K* 659 / *G* 625). According to Sri Ramakrishna, the strongest evidence for God’s existence is that mystics in various traditions, including himself, claim to have experienced God directly. Since I provide a detailed reconstruction of Sri Ramakrishna’s argument from experience in section III, I will only point out here that his stance on the argument from experience is similar to his stance on the teleological argument. Sri Ramakrishna’s telling final question—“Who will believe me?”—suggests that while the argument from experience can play a valuable role in strengthening the faith of religious

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14. Placed in an Indian philosophical context, Sri Ramakrishna’s position on the limitations of rational arguments for God’s existence is in line with Vedānta rather than with Nyāya. As Francis X. Clooney observes, Naiyāyikas attempt to prove God’s existence through rational arguments, but Vedāntins argue that “scripture alone is the source of knowledge of Brahman while reason, which cannot proceed on its own, is still usefully supportive of claims about Brahman.” *Hindu God, Christian God: How Reason Helps Break Down the Boundaries between Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 54.

15. See John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (London: Macmillan, 1989), 122–24.

believers, it may not be rationally compelling for those who are skeptical of God's existence.<sup>16</sup> For the remainder of the chapter, it is important to keep in mind that Sri Ramakrishna defends the argument from experience from the standpoint not of a natural theologian but of a responsible fideist.

## II. Sri Ramakrishna and the Question of Self-Authenticating Mystical Experience

Philosophers concerned with the epistemology of mystical experience often discuss an important question: is it possible for an experience of God to be self-authenticating? A self-authenticating experience is an experience that guarantees—all by itself—its own veridicality to its epistemic subject.<sup>17</sup> Hence, anyone who enjoys a self-authenticating experience of God (hereafter SAGE) would be rationally justified in taking the experience itself as infallible justification for believing that the experience is veridical and that God, therefore, exists. Of course, a SAGE would only have maximal evidential value for the person who had the SAGE and not for anyone else.

There are two key questions regarding SAGEs, the first epistemological and the second historical: (Q1) Is a SAGE logically possible? and (Q2) Have mainstream mystics in any religious tradition ever claimed to have had a SAGE? Some early twentieth-century philosophers, including John Baillie and H. H. Farmer, answered both Q1 and Q2 in the affirmative.<sup>18</sup> Farmer, for instance, asserts that “the Christian experience of God . . . must be self-authenticating and able to shine in its own light independently of the abstract reflections of philosophy, for if it were not, it could hardly be a living experience of God as personal.”<sup>19</sup> In contrast, the philosophers C. B. Martin and Antony Flew answered Q1 in the negative and Q2 in the affirmative.<sup>20</sup> According to Martin and Flew, even though many mystics have *claimed* that their mystical experiences are self-authenticating, these mystics are not rationally justified in making this claim, since a SAGE is

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16. Gwen Griffith-Dickson seems to share Sri Ramakrishna's view that the argument from experience is not rationally compelling for everyone. See her book *Human and Divine: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religious Experience* (London: Duckworth, 2000), 122–23.

17. This is a slightly modified version of Robert Oakes's definition of self-authenticating experience in his article “Mysticism, Veridicality, and Modality,” *Faith and Philosophy* 2.3 (July 1985), 218.

18. John Baillie, *The Sense of the Presence of God* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963) and H. H. Farmer, *The World and God* (London: Nisbet, 1935), 158.

19. Farmer, *The World and God*, 158.

20. C. B. Martin, *Religious Belief* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1959), 64–94, and Antony Flew, *God and Philosophy* (New York: Prometheus Books, [1966] 2005), 131–44.



logically impossible. Meanwhile, the vast majority of more recent philosophers of religion—including Alston, Gary Gutting, and Keith Yandell—have answered both Q1 and Q2 in the negative.<sup>21</sup> According to the now prevalent view, a SAGE is logically impossible, and the vast majority of mystics do not even claim that their experiences of God are self-authenticating.

As far as I am aware, Robert Oakes is the only contemporary philosopher who has challenged this prevailing orthodoxy about SAGES. In a series of articles published between 1976 and 2005, Oakes has defended an affirmative answer to Q1: a SAGE, he argues, is logically possible.<sup>22</sup> He also begins to provide an affirmative answer to Q2 by showing that well-known mystics such as Saint Teresa of Ávila and Thomas Merton claimed to have enjoyed SAGES.<sup>23</sup> In this section, I will argue that Sri Ramakrishna's mystical testimony and teachings bolster Oakes's promising defense of affirmative answers to Q1 and Q2.

It is clear from Sri Ramakrishna's mystical testimony that he considered some, but not all, of his experiences of God to have been self-authenticating. In section IV, I will discuss in detail some of his visions of God which he initially doubted but which he subsequently confirmed by means of checking procedures. Clearly, these visions of God could not have been self-authenticating, since the experiences themselves were not sufficient to guarantee their veridicality. However, Sri Ramakrishna also frequently taught, on the basis of his own mystical experiences, that the highest salvific experience of God *is* self-authenticating. He makes this clear in the following parable:

After having the vision of God man is overwhelmed with bliss [*tāke darśan hole mānuṣ ānande bihval hoye jāi*]. He becomes silent. Who will speak?

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21. Gary Gutting, *Religious Belief and Religious Skepticism* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 145–46; Keith Yandell, *The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 163–75; Michael Levine, “Can There Be Self-Authenticating Experiences of God?,” *Religious Studies* 19 (1983), 229–34; William Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 80–81; Jerome Gellman, *Experience of God and the Rationality of Theistic Belief* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 47; Gregory Dawes, *Religion, Philosophy, and Knowledge* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2016), 87–91; Griffith-Dickson, *Human and Divine*, 142.

22. See the following articles by Robert Oakes: “Religious Experience and Rational Certainty,” *Religious Studies* 12 (1976), 311–18; “Religious Experience, Self-Authentication, and Modality *De Re*: A Prolegomenon,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16.3 (July 1979), 217–24; “Religious Experience and Epistemological Miracles: A Moderate Defense of Theistic Mysticism,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 12 (1981), 97–110; “Mysticism, Veridicality, and Modality,” 217–35; “Transparent Veridicality and Phenomenological Imposters: The Telling Issue,” *Faith and Philosophy* 22.4 (October 2005), 413–25.

23. Oakes, “Religious Experience and Epistemological Miracles,” 109 n. 1; Oakes, “Transparent Veridicality and Phenomenological Imposters,” 413; and Oakes, “Mysticism, Veridicality, and Modality,” 217.

Who will explain? The king lives beyond seven gates. At each gate sits a man endowed with great power and glory. At each gate the visitor asks, "Is this the king?" The gate-keeper answers, "No. Not this, not this." The visitor passes through the seventh gate and becomes overpowered with joy. He is speechless. This time he doesn't have to ask, "Is this the king?" The mere sight of him removes all doubts [*dekhei sab saṁśaya cole jāi*]. (*K* 182 / *G* 218)

For Sri Ramakrishna, cross-checking procedures are appropriate for any mystical experience that falls short of the highest self-authenticating experience of God. Accordingly, the visitor repeatedly asks the gatekeeper whether the man he sees at each of the seven gates is the king. By contrast, the highest realization of God—which Sri Ramakrishna likens to seeing the king beyond the seventh gate—does not require cross-checking, since the experience itself "removes all doubts." Sri Ramakrishna, then, considers the highest salvific realization of God to be self-authenticating in that it guarantees its own veridicality to its epistemic subject.

As I discussed at length in earlier chapters, Sri Ramakrishna's expansive conception of God as the impersonal-personal Infinite Reality entails that the highest salvific experience of God can take different forms, depending on the particular makeup of the mystic. For a theistic mystic, the highest salvific experience usually consists in the experience of loving union with the personal God. For an Advaitin, by contrast, the highest salvific realization consists in the experience of dissolving one's individuality in the impersonal nondual Brahman.

As a *viññānī*, Sri Ramakrishna enjoyed both types of salvific experience, and his teachings in the *Kathāmṛta* make clear that he took each type of salvific experience to be self-authenticating. Take, for instance, his teaching about the self-authenticating nature of the highest theistic realization of God: "Better than reading is hearing, and better than hearing is seeing. One understands the scriptures better by hearing them from the lips of the guru or of a holy man. . . . But seeing [*dekha*] is far better than hearing. At the sight of God, all doubts disappear [*dekhle sab sandeha cole jāi*]. It is true that many things are recorded in the scriptures; but all these are useless without the direct realization of God [*śvarer sāṅsātkār*], without devotion to His Lotus Feet, without purity of heart" (*K* 478 / *G* 476). According to Sri Ramakrishna, while we may have strong faith in God after hearing about God from saints, our doubts about God's existence cannot be entirely dispelled until we have the direct experience of God. He makes clear that the *bhakta's* salvific realization of the personal God is self-authenticating, since the very experience of God is sufficient and infallible guarantee of its own veridicality: "At the sight of God, all doubts disappear." Sri Ramakrishna also affirms that the Advaitic realization of the nondual Ātman is self-authenticating: "Without

God's grace, one's doubts will not disappear. Without the realization of the Ātman, doubts do not disappear [*ātmār sākeṣātkār nā hole sandeḥa bhañjan hoy nā*]" (K 64 / G 116).<sup>24</sup> He emphasizes that it is only through God's grace that one attains the self-authenticating Advaitic realization of the impersonal Ātman. He likewise declares, on the basis of his own mystical experiences, that the panentheistic experience of *vijñāna* is self-authenticating:

All doubts disappear when one sees God [*tāke kintu darśan korle sab saṁśay cole jāi*]. It is one thing to hear of God, but quite a different thing to see Him. One cannot have one hundred percent conviction [*śolo ānā viśvās*] through mere hearing. After realizing God, one has complete and infallible conviction [*sākeṣātkār hole ār viśvāser kichu bākī thāke nā*].

Formal worship drops away after the vision of God [*īśvardarśan*]. It was thus that my worship in the temple came to an end. I used to worship the Deity in the Kālī temple. It was suddenly revealed to me that everything is suffused with Consciousness [*cinmay*]. The utensils of worship, the altar, the doorframe—all Pure Consciousness. Men, animals, and other living beings—all Pure Consciousness. Then like a madman I began to shower flowers in all directions. Whatever I saw I worshipped. (K 394 / G 396)

For Sri Ramakrishna, God-realization is self-authenticating, since it generates an "infallible conviction" that makes it impossible to doubt God's existence any longer. He then specifically refers to his own ecstatic self-authenticating experience of *vijñāna*, the realization that everything is "Pure Consciousness." Crucially, Sri Ramakrishna does not merely maintain that one who realizes God has a subjective feeling of complete certainty that his experience is veridical. Rather, he is making the much stronger claim that the God-realized mystic's feeling of complete certainty is an *infallible* one that guarantees the veridicality of his experience.

It is worth noting that Sri Ramakrishna's claim that the highest experience of God is self-authenticating, far from being anomalous, is entirely in keeping with the mainstream Vedāntic tradition. For instance, Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad 2.2.9 states: "When the Supreme is seen, the knot of the heart-strings is rent, all doubts are cut asunder, and one's *karma* is entirely exhausted."<sup>25</sup> Similarly,

24. For other references to the self-authenticating nature of *ātmajñāna*, see K 221 / G 252 and K 922 / G 853.

25. My translation is a modified version of Sri Aurobindo's rendering in *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, vol. 18: *The Upanishads—II: Kena and Other Upanishads* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 2001), 141.

the *Bhagavad Gītā* repeatedly declares that the highest spiritual knowledge is self-authenticating. In 4.41 of the *Gītā*, for instance, the Lord Kṛṣṇa refers to the Knower of Brahman as “one whose doubt has been totally destroyed by Knowledge” (*jñāna-saṁchinna-saṁśayam*). These scriptural verses affirm that the highest mystical knowledge of the Supreme Reality is self-authenticating, since it is sufficient, by itself, to dispel all doubts about its veridicality. The Advaita Vedāntin Śaṅkara, in his *Upadeśasāhasrī*, likewise declares that the experience of the nondual Ātman is “self-validating” (*svapramāṇakah*).<sup>26</sup>

Indeed, I believe it would not be difficult to furnish evidence that numerous mystics in *non*-Indian spiritual traditions also considered at least some of their experiences of God to be self-authenticating. Although a full justification of this claim is beyond the scope of this chapter, I will begin to substantiate this claim by citing some salient passages from two great Christian mystics. Take this striking passage from the mystical testimony of Angela of Foligno:

At times God comes into the soul without being called; and He instills into her fire, love, and sometimes sweetness; and the soul believes this comes from God, and delights therein. But she does not yet know, or see, that He dwells in her; she perceives His grace, in which she delights. And again God comes to the soul, and speaks to her words full of sweetness, in which she has much joy, and she feels Him. This feeling of God gives her the greatest delight; but even here a certain doubt remains; for the soul has not the certitude that God is in her. . . . And beyond this the soul receives the gift of seeing God. God says to her, “Behold Me!” and the soul sees Him dwelling within her. She sees Him more clearly than one man sees another. For the eyes of the soul behold a plenitude of which I cannot speak: a plenitude which is not bodily but spiritual, of which I can say nothing. And the soul rejoices in that sight with an ineffable joy; and this is the manifest and certain sign that God indeed dwells in her.<sup>27</sup>

There are three striking parallels between Angela’s testimony and Sri Ramakrishna’s parable of the king and seven gates. First, both Sri Ramakrishna and Angela contrast the highest self-authenticating experience of God with lesser mystical experiences that are open to doubt. Second, both mystics maintain that the indescribable bliss of the highest God-realization itself attests infallibly to the

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26. Śaṅkarācārya, *Upadeśa Sāhasrī*, trans. Swami Jagadananda (Mylapore, India: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1941), 278 (18.203 of the metrical portion).

27. Angela of Foligno, *The Book of Divine Consolations of the Blessed Angela of Foligno*, trans. M. Steegmann (London: New Medieval Library, 1908), 24. Cited in Alston, *Perceiving God*, 13.

veridicality of the experience. As Angela puts it, the “ineffable joy” of her vision of God is the “manifest and certain sign” of its veridicality. Third, according to both Angela and Sri Ramakrishna, one can attain the highest self-authenticating experience of God only through God’s grace.

Teresa of Ávila also unambiguously affirms that the highest theistic experience of union with God is self-authenticating:

Thus does God, when he raises a soul to union with himself, suspend the natural action of all her faculties. She neither sees, hears, nor understands, so long as she is united with God. But this time is always short, and it seems even shorter than it is. God establishes himself in the interior of this soul in such a way, that when she returns to herself, it is wholly impossible for her to doubt that she has been in God, and God in her. This truth remains so strongly impressed on her that, even though many years should pass without the condition returning, she can neither forget the favor she received, nor doubt of its reality. If you, nevertheless, ask how it is possible that the soul can see and understand that she has been in God, since during the union she has neither sight nor understanding, I reply that she does not see it then, but that she sees it clearly later, after she has returned to herself, not by any vision, but by a certitude which abides with her and which God alone can give her.

But how, you will repeat, *can* one have such certainty in respect to what one does not see? This question, I am powerless to answer. These are secrets of God’s omnipotence which it does not appertain to me to penetrate. All that I know is that I tell the truth; and I shall never believe that any soul who does not possess this certainty has ever been really united to God.<sup>28</sup>

According to Teresa, the mystical experience of loving union with God is so overwhelmingly vivid and ecstatic that it is “wholly impossible” for the mystic to doubt the veridicality of her experience. Of course, a skeptic might object that the mystic’s complete *subjective* certainty of the veridicality of her experience of God is compatible with the experience being nonveridical. Anticipating this objection, Teresa insists that the experience itself involves an epistemically unique feeling of “certitude”—granted to the mystic by God Himself—which *guarantees* the veridicality of her experience. From Teresa’s perspective, since the mystic’s certitude is part of the phenomenological content of the experience itself, the mystic is rationally justified in taking her experience to be a self-authenticating

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28. Cited in James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 409–10.

experience of union with God. Teresa then anticipates another objection: how is it even possible for someone to have such an infallible certitude of union with God? Tellingly, she responds to this objection by appealing to God's unfathomable omnipotence. Although she admits that she cannot provide a rational explanation of how this certitude is possible, she insists that the omnipotent God *does* grant this infallible certitude to certain blessed souls.

Such passages from the mystical testimony of Sri Ramakrishna, Angela of Foligno, and Teresa of Ávila provide strong preliminary evidence for an affirmative answer to Q2: prominent mystics in multiple religious traditions claimed to have SAGES.<sup>29</sup> However, as I already pointed out, an affirmative answer to Q2 does not entail an affirmative answer to Q1. After all, if a SAGE is logically impossible, then even if certain mystics *claimed* to have had a SAGE, these mystics would not be rationally justified in making this claim. Indeed, a number of recent philosophers have argued for a negative answer to Q1.<sup>30</sup> According to these philosophers, a SAGE is logically impossible, because it is always conceivable that a *nonveridical* experience of (some mind-independent) X is phenomenologically identical to a veridical experience of X. As Alston puts it, "Delusory experiences can be phenomenally indistinguishable from veridical ones, in the mystical realm as well as the sensory. Nothing in the experience itself suffices to distinguish one from the other."<sup>31</sup> Oakes has aptly dubbed this the "Phenomenological Indiscernibility Postulate" (PIP).<sup>32</sup>

Some philosophers, such as Alston and Gutting, take PIP to be self-evidently true, so they do not feel the need to justify it.<sup>33</sup> Others, such as Yandell and C. B. Martin, attempt to provide justification for PIP.<sup>34</sup> Their justification of PIP can be summarized as follows. The only experiences that may be self-authenticating are experiences of one's own existence or the experience of one's own current mental

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29. See also the following passages from the testimony of a variety of other non-Indian mystics who claim to have had SAGES: Richard Bucke (cited in William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* [New York: Penguin, (1902) 1985, 399]), Thomas Merton (cited in Oakes, "Transparent Veridicality and Phenomenological Imposters," 413), the Sufi mystic Gulshan-Raz (cited in James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 420), and an anonymous Christian clergyman (cited in James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 66–67).

30. For references, see notes 20 and 21.

31. Alston, *Perceiving God*, 81.

32. Oakes, "Transparent Veridicality and Phenomenological Imposters," 415–16.

33. Alston, *Perceiving God*, 80–81, and Gutting, *Religious Belief and Religious Skepticism*, 145–46.

34. Yandell, *The Epistemology of Religious Experience*, 163–82; C. B. Martin, *Religious Belief*, 64–94; Dawes, *Religion, Philosophy, and Knowledge*, 89.

states, such as the experience of pain.<sup>35</sup> The subjective experience of being in pain, for instance, may be self-authenticating precisely because its intentional object is (arguably) not a mind-independent reality. Hence, it is conceivable that PIP does not apply to certain pain-experiences. For instance, if I say, “I feel pain,” and someone were to say, “How do you know that you’re *really* feeling pain?” I can plausibly respond that my experience of pain is self-authenticating, since the very fact that I *feel* pain suffices to make it a veridical experience. Conversely, any experience the intentional object of which is a mind-independent reality—such as a spatiotemporal object or God—*cannot* be self-authenticating, since no phenomenological feature of the experience itself suffices to ensure its veridicality. Since PIP necessarily applies to all putative experiences of a mind-independent reality, it is always conceivable that an experience of God is nonveridical. Therefore, a SAGE is logically impossible.<sup>36</sup>

How convincing is this argument for the logical impossibility of a SAGE? I would argue that it is not convincing. Notice that the claim that PIP applies to all putative experiences of a mind-independent reality is justified inductively on the basis of experiences that are familiar to us: namely, subjective experiences of pain and experiences of spatiotemporal objects. Since PIP applies to both these familiar types of experience, philosophers such as Yandell, Alston, and Martin infer that PIP necessarily applies to all experiences of God as well. The problem, however, is that they do not provide adequate justification of this inductive inference. When pressed, they might claim that we have no good reason to believe that PIP does not apply to experiences of God. However, this claim—even if it were true—would not establish that PIP *necessarily* applies to all perceptual experiences, including all (stipulatively) veridical experiences of God. Therefore, in order to establish the logical possibility of a SAGE, it suffices to show that it is *conceivable* that a certain type of veridical experience of God has a radically different epistemic structure from sensory experience (to which PIP always applies), such that the very having of the mystical experience guarantees its veridicality.

Fortunately, Oakes provides precisely such an argument for the conceivability of a SAGE.<sup>37</sup> According to Oakes, the logical possibility of the existence of a theistic God suffices to establish the logical possibility of a SAGE.<sup>38</sup> His

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35. See Oakes, “Religious Experience and Epistemological Miracles,” 102 and Yandell, *The Epistemology of Religious Experience*, 166–67.

36. C. B. Martin, *Religious Belief*, 90–94.

37. In fact, Oakes provides several arguments in favor of the logical possibility of SAGES in different articles. I focus here on Oakes’s argument in his article “Religious Experience and Epistemological Miracles,” which I find especially promising.

38. Oakes, “Religious Experience and Epistemological Miracles,” 106–7.



argument runs as follows. The theistic God, by virtue of His omnipotence, would not be bound by any logically contingent connections—such as the laws of nature—and would, therefore, have the ability to *breach* such contingently lawful connections. Therefore, God would be able to perform various miracles, such as the parting of the Red Sea and the resurrection of Christ, since these miracles are nothing but breaches of natural law. Oakes formulates the rest of his argument as follows:

[S]ince it is clear that any being worthy of the title “God” would have the power to bring about “miraculous events,” i.e., the power to violate natural, “causal,” or de facto connections at will, such power would clearly extend to any connections of that sort which are *epistemological* in character. In short, it seems unimpeachable that any being worthy of the title “God” would have the power to effect “*epistemic* miracles” as well as those of the traditionally cited ontological variety. This being so, we are now positioned to establish that it is perfectly conceivable for God to bring about self-authenticating experiences of Himself; for the occurrence of any such experience can readily be seen to constitute an “epistemic miracle,” and, consequently, an epistemological event which God would have the power to bring about.<sup>39</sup>

It is likely that even an omnipotent God would not be able to bring about *any* state of affairs. For instance, since it is a necessary truth that  $2 + 2 = 4$ , God would not be able to make  $2 + 2$  equal to 5. However, as I argued in the previous paragraph, it is *not* a necessary truth that PIP applies to all perceptual experiences.<sup>40</sup> Hence, I believe Oakes is justified in claiming that an omnipotent God would be able to perform the epistemic miracle of bringing about self-authenticating experiences of Himself by suspending the de facto applicability of PIP to these experiences. Therefore, Oakes’s argument justifies an affirmative answer to Q1: a SAGE is a logical possibility, since it is conceivable that God would be able to bring about mystical experiences to which PIP does not apply.

In a rebuttal to Oakes’s defense of the logical possibility of a SAGE, Michael Levine argues that Oakes “needs to elucidate and defend a noncritical account of knowledge and certainty that extends beyond first person statements about one’s own current mental states to statements about religious experiences of a certain type.”<sup>41</sup> What Levine seems to demand is a precise

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39. Oakes, “Religious Experience and Epistemological Miracles,” 106–7.

40. Or, at least no one to date has convincingly *argued* that PIP is a necessary truth.

41. Levine, “Self-Authenticating Experiences of God: A Reply to Professor Oakes,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 16 (1984), 162.

explanation of *how* one can be certain of the veridicality of a particular religious experience on the basis of the experience alone. The testimony of mystics such as Teresa and Sri Ramakrishna can help show why Levine's demand is unreasonable. As we have seen, Teresa explicitly raises the question of how a SAGE is possible, and she responds that "these are secrets of God's omnipotence which it does not appertain to me to penetrate." From Teresa's perspective, our inability to explain the precise epistemic structure of a SAGE, far from indicating the logical impossibility of a SAGE, reflects the limitations of human thought and language. It is hardly surprising that the omnipotent God can bring about self-authenticating experiences of Himself that we cannot explain with our finite intellects.

Like Teresa, Sri Ramakrishna explains how SAGES are possible by appealing to God's omnipotence:

I have observed that a man acquires one kind of knowledge about God through reasoning and another kind through meditation; but he acquires a third kind of Knowledge about God when God reveals Himself [*tini jakhan dekhiye den*] to His devotee. . . . Do you know what it is like? Suppose a man is in a dark room. He goes on rubbing a match against a match-box and all of a sudden light comes. Likewise, if God gives us this flash of divine light, all our doubts are destroyed [*seirakam dap kore ālo jadi tini den, tāhole sab sandeha mīṭe jāi*]. Can one ever know God by mere reasoning? (*K* 779 / *G* 734)

According to Sri Ramakrishna, we can have a self-authenticating experience of God only when God Himself gives us an instantaneous "flash of divine light." This flash of divine light, which is part of the phenomenology of the experience itself, suffices to guarantee the veridicality of the experience. However, through "mere reasoning," we can never understand *how* such a "flash of divine light" can be self-authenticating. Of course, critics such as Yandell and Levine could persist in maintaining that this "flash of divine light" is nothing more than a strong subjective feeling of certainty that cannot possibly guarantee the veridicality of the experience. I would argue that these critics unjustifiably assume that the experience of God necessarily has the same epistemic structure as ordinary perceptual experience. As Sri Ramakrishna makes clear, a SAGE consists precisely in the epistemic miracle of experiencing God in such a manner that the mystic has *infallible* certainty—that is, not merely subjective certainty—of the veridicality of the experience solely on the basis of the experience itself. Therefore, to assume without argument that PIP necessarily applies to all experiences of putatively mind-independent realities—as Yandell, Levine, and other critics do—is to beg the question.

Contrary to the prevailing view among contemporary philosophers, I have argued that there are good reasons to answer both Q1 and Q2 in the affirmative. Oakes has made a convincing case that it is logically possible for an omnipotent God to bring about the epistemic miracle of a self-authenticating experience of Himself. Moreover, the testimony of mystics as diverse as Sri Ramakrishna, Teresa of Ávila, and Angela of Foligno provides strong preliminary evidence that at least some prominent mystics reported having had SAGEs. Since we cannot rule out the logical possibility of SAGEs, such mystics were rationally justified in taking their experiences of God to be self-authenticating.

### III. The Argument from Experience in the Light of Sri Ramakrishna

We can now investigate other important epistemological questions concerning mystical experience. Is a mystic who has had a putative experience of God that is *not* self-authenticating rationally justified in taking it to be veridical? And are we nonmystics rationally justified in believing that a given mystic's putative experience of God is veridical?<sup>42</sup> A number of recent philosophers such as Swinburne, Gellman, and Wainwright have answered both of these questions in the affirmative by defending versions of what has come to be known as the "argument from religious experience" or, more simply, as the "argument from experience."<sup>43</sup> According to these philosophers, the fact that mystics in various traditions claim to have experienced God counts as substantial evidence for God's existence. The remainder of this chapter explores how Sri Ramakrishna's mystical testimony and teachings can bolster the argument from experience in various ways.

During the early phase of his spiritual practice, Sri Ramakrishna's strong faith in God seems to have been based, in part, on a simple form of the argument from experience. As a spiritual aspirant, he would often think: "Rāmprasād and other devotees had the vision of the Divine Mother. One can definitely see Her. Why can't I?" (*LP* I.ii.64 / *DP* 211). He would also pray to the Divine Mother: "Mother, You showed Yourself to Rāmprasād. Why won't you show Yourself to me? I don't want wealth, friends and family, or objects of enjoyment. Please reveal Yourself to me" (*LP* I.ii.64 / *DP* 211). The testimony of mystics such

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42. I adapt these questions from section 8 of Jerome Gellman's article "Mysticism," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2014 edition (<http://plato.stanford.edu>).

43. See Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 293–327; Caroline Franks Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989); Gellman, *Experience of God*; William Wainwright, *Mysticism: A Study of its Nature, Cognitive Value and Moral Implications* (Brighton, UK: Harvester Press, 1981); Yandell, *The Epistemology of Religious Experience*.

as Rāmprasād who claimed to have realized God convinced Sri Ramakrishna not only that God exists but also that it is possible for anyone to realize God through God's grace and the practice of spiritual disciplines. On the basis of this faith in God, Sri Ramakrishna engaged in intense spiritual practice and ultimately validated his faith by experiencing God himself.

Later in his life, Sri Ramakrishna often encouraged his visitors to have faith in the testimony of saints who have realized God. On one occasion, when the homeopathic doctor Mahendralāl Sarkār expressed doubt about the possibility of God incarnating as a human being, Sri Ramakrishna told him: "How can we say emphatically with our small intelligence that God cannot assume a human form? Can we ever understand all these ideas with our little intellect? Can a one-seer pot hold four seers of milk? Therefore, one should trust in the words of holy men and great souls, those who have realized God. They constantly think of God, as a lawyer of his lawsuits" (*K* 933–34 / *G* 864). According to Sri Ramakrishna, just as it is reasonable for us to trust the advice of lawyers with respect to legal matters, it is reasonable for us to trust the teachings of God-intoxicated saints with respect to spiritual matters.

On another occasion, a visitor asked Sri Ramakrishna, "Sir, what is the proof [*pramāṇ*] that the Ātman is separate from the body?" and Sri Ramakrishna responded: "Proof? God can be seen; by practising austerities one sees God, through His grace. The ancient sages directly realized the Ātman" (*pramāṇ? īśvarke dekhā jāi. tapasyā korle tār kṛpāi īśvardarśan hoy. ṛṣirā ātmār sāṅsātkār korechilen*) (*K* 429 / *G* 429). According to Sri Ramakrishna, the only conclusive proof of the reality of the Ātman is experiential rather than rational: by realizing the Ātman directly, one attains infallible certainty of its reality. However, for those who have not realized the Ātman, the best evidence for its existence is the fact that sages in the past declared that they "directly realized the Ātman." In other words, Sri Ramakrishna presents a version of the argument from experience: it is reasonable for us to believe that God exists on the basis of the testimony of saints who claim to have experienced God. For Sri Ramakrishna, the argument from experience lends rational support to the belief not only that God exists but also that God can be experienced directly. Endowed with this faith, one should engage in spiritual disciplines with the aim of realizing God "through His grace," thereby attaining conclusive proof of God's existence.

Numerous recent philosophers have defended sophisticated forms of the argument from experience.<sup>44</sup> Although the argument has been formulated in a variety of ways, it usually takes the following basic form:

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44. For references, see note 43.

1. Experiences occur which their subjects take to be experiences of God.
2. Such putative experiences of God are perceptual in nature, since they are closely analogous to sense-perceptual experiences.
3. When subjects have a perceptual experience which they take to be of x, it is rational to conclude that they really do experience x unless we have some positive reasons to think their experiences are delusive.
4. There are no good, positive reasons for thinking that all or most experiences which their subjects take to be of God are delusive.
5. Agreement about putative experiences of God in diverse circumstances enhances the evidence in favor of their veridicality.

Therefore,

6. It is rational to believe that at least some putative experiences of God are veridical.
7. It is rational to believe that God exists.<sup>45</sup>

Premise 1 is uncontroversially true, since it only states that some people *believe* that they have experienced God, which leaves open the possibility that they are mistaken. Premises 2 through 5, however, are quite controversial. Indeed, entire books have been written defending or refuting these premises of the argument from experience. Since a comprehensive discussion of the argument from experience is beyond the scope of this chapter, I will only briefly mention some of the main arguments both for and against the controversial premises of the argument from experience. Sri Ramakrishna's mystical testimony and teachings, I argue, not only support these premises but also suggest new ways to defuse some of the most serious objections to the argument from experience.

Recent proponents of the argument from experience defend premise 2 by identifying key similarities between experiences of God and sense-perceptual experiences.<sup>46</sup> Three such similarities are frequently emphasized. First, experiences of God, like sense-perceptual experiences, often have a subject-object structure. Second, subjects tend to make truth-claims on the basis of their experiences of God. That is, just as we are often moved to claim that a given sense object exists because we experience it, mystics are often moved to claim that God exists because

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45. My formulation of the argument from experience draws heavily from William Rowe, "Religious Experience and the Principle of Credulity," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 13 (1982), 87. I adapt premise 5 from Gellman's formulation of the argument from experience in "Mysticism."

46. See, for instance, Gellman, *Experience of God*, 50–52; Wainwright, *Mysticism*, 82–101; Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*, 67–76.

they experience God. Third, just as there are numerous ways of cross-checking the veridicality of sense-perceptual experiences, there are numerous ways of cross-checking the veridicality of experiences of God. For instance, one way for us to verify a mystic's claims would be to engage in appropriate spiritual practices, which would help put us in a position to experience God for ourselves.

In his teachings, Sri Ramakrishna identifies all three of these similarities between theistic experiences of God and sensory experiences. Tellingly, in the statement cited earlier, he describes the experience of God using the language of sensory experience: "God can be *seen*," "one *sees* God, through His grace." Obviously, Sri Ramakrishna does not mean to imply that God is a sense object that can be seen with physical eyes; rather, he emphasizes that the experience of God is *closely analogous* to the experience of sense objects in its perceptual quality and immediacy.<sup>47</sup> In fact, he repeatedly highlights the analogy between sensory experience and the experience of God. When his disciple Narendra asked him, "Sir, have you seen God?" Sri Ramakrishna replied, "Yes, I have seen God. I have seen Him more tangibly than I see you. I have talked to Him more intimately than I am talking to you" (*G* 57). Similarly, he told his visitors on another occasion: "He who seeks God with a longing heart can see Him, talk to Him as I am talking to you [*īśvarke vyākul hoye khūjle tāke darśan hoy, tār saṅge ālāp hoy, kathā hoy; jemon, āmi tomāder saṅge kathā kocchi*]. I am telling you the truth: God can be seen" (*K* 659 / *G* 625). Sri Ramakrishna's striking assertion that one can converse with God just as one converses with another person supports the thesis that theistic experiences of God have a subject-object structure akin to that of sensory experiences. He also points out that others can verify a mystic's claims about God by seeking God "with a longing heart" and experiencing God for themselves.

One might point out, however, that the Advaitic experience of becoming one with Brahman clearly does not have a subject-object structure. That Sri Ramakrishna was aware of this is indicated by his use of the analogy of a salt doll to describe Advaitic experience: one merges with Brahman in the way that a salt doll merges with the ocean (*K* 121 / *G* 170). According to Sri Ramakrishna, while Advaitic experience does not have a subject-object structure, it is nonetheless analogous to sensory experience in at least three important respects. First, the term he frequently uses to describe the realization of the Ātman—namely, *sākṣātkār*, which means direct spiritual perception—indicates that the experience of the Ātman, like sensory experience, has the quality of immediacy and directness. Second, Sri Ramakrishna maintains that both theistic and Advaitic mystics

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47. According to Wainwright, the fact that "[m]ystical experience is often said to be a kind of 'seeing' or 'tasting' or 'touching'" suggests an analogy between mystical experience and sensory experience. See William Wainwright, "Mysticism and Sense Perception," *Religious Studies* 9.3 (September 1973), 258. Sri Ramakrishna's teachings support Wainwright's claim.

are equally moved to make truth-claims on the basis of their mystical experiences. Accordingly, in the passage cited earlier, Sri Ramakrishna remarks that the ancient sages affirmed the reality of the Ātman on the basis of their own direct experience of the Ātman (*K* 429 / *G* 429). Third, he maintains that both Advaitic and theistic experiences, like sensory experiences, are amenable to verification by others. When he was asked for “proof” of the reality of the Ātman, he replied that “by practising austerities one sees God, through His grace” (*K* 429 / *G* 429). For Sri Ramakrishna, then, premise 2 of the argument from experience applies to experiences of the personal God as well as to nondual experiences of the Ātman.

Some critics of the argument from experience, including Evan Fales and Richard Gale, challenge premise 2 by arguing that there are fundamental disanalogies between experiences of God and sensory experiences.<sup>48</sup> One major disanalogy, according to these critics, is that claims based on sensory experiences can be adequately cross-checked, while claims based on experiences of God cannot.<sup>49</sup> In section IV, I will argue that Sri Ramakrishna’s mystical testimony provides resources for defending premise 2 against this important objection.

Swinburne dubs premise 3 of the argument from experience the “principle of credulity” (hereafter PC) and argues that it is a fundamental principle of rationality, which we must accept in order to avoid landing in a “sceptical bog.”<sup>50</sup> That is, in our everyday dealings, we take our seeming experience of a particular sense object as *prima facie* evidence for the existence of that object, unless we have a good reason to doubt the veridicality of our experience. That I *seem* to see, say, an orange in front of me is *prima facie* evidence that there actually is an orange in front of me. Some philosophers argue that PC requires further qualification in order to be plausible.<sup>51</sup> Other critics, however, accept PC as it stands while rejecting premise 2: PC does not apply to experiences of God, since they are not

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48. Evan Fales, “Mystical Experience as Evidence,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 40.1 (August 1996), 19–46; Richard Gale, *On the Nature and Existence of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 285–343; Ralph W. Clark, “The Evidential Value of Religious Experiences,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 16.3 (1984), 189–202.

49. See note 67 below.

50. Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 304 n. 10. It should be noted that Swinburne formulates PC in such a way that it applies only to the mystic who has a putative experience of God. Swinburne then supplements PC with the “principle of testimony” to justify the *prima facie* acceptance of a mystic’s testimony by nonmystics (322–24). Gellman reformulates PC as “BEE” (“Best Explanation of Experience”), which incorporates Swinburne’s principle of testimony as well (*Experience of God*, 46–48). My formulation of premise 3, like Gellman’s BEE, combines PC with Swinburne’s principle of testimony.

51. See, for instance, Rowe, “Religious Experience and the Principle of Credulity”; Gutting, *Religious Belief and Religious Skepticism*, 147–50; and Henry Samuel Levinson and Jonathan Malino, “Who’s Afraid of a BEE STING?,” *Iyyun: The Jerusalem Philosophical Quarterly* 48



sufficiently similar to sensory experiences to count as perceptual experiences in the first place.<sup>52</sup>

Although Sri Ramakrishna never explicitly affirms PC, his repeated emphasis on the close analogies between sensory experience and the experience of God strongly implies PC. After telling his visitors that one can “see” and “talk to” God just as he is talking to them, Sri Ramakrishna says, “I am telling you the truth: God can be seen” (*K* 659 / *G* 625). Here, Sri Ramakrishna encourages his visitors to believe that God exists and can be experienced on the basis of his own testimony that he has directly experienced God. His reasoning seems to presuppose PC: since experiences of God are closely analogous to sensory experiences, and it is reasonable for us to take the testimony of a reliable person who claims to have experienced a sense object as evidence for the existence of that object, then it is also reasonable for us to take the testimony of a trustworthy mystic who claims to have experienced God as evidence for the existence of God.

Premise 4 of the argument from experience has been vigorously debated. Critics have adopted two strategies for denying premise 4, one from the side of the object (i.e. God) and one from the side of the subject (i.e. the mystic who claims to have experienced God). From the object side, critics argue that since there are independent grounds for believing that God does not exist, we have good reason to believe that experiences of God are never veridical. These critics tend to appeal to arguments against God’s existence, such as those based on God’s hiddenness and on the existence of apparently gratuitous evil.<sup>53</sup> From the subject side, critics argue that there are grounds for thinking that experiences of God occur under circumstances that often result in delusive experiences. Bertrand Russell, for instance, argues that mystics’ experiences of God are likely delusive since religious practices such as fasting cause these mystics to be in an abnormal psychological state.<sup>54</sup> Other critics claim that a naturalistic explanation of experiences of God—such as a Freudian, Marxian, or sociological one—is more plausible than a theistic explanation.<sup>55</sup> Still other philosophers have leveled the “conflicting claims” objection to premise 4: the fact that mystics have made

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(July 1999), 304–5. Gutting defends a version of the argument from experience based on a modified form of PC (*Religious Belief and Religious Skepticism*, 141–77).

52. See Michael Martin, “The Principle of Credulity and Religious Experience,” *Religious Studies* 22.1 (March 1986), 79–93.

53. See, for instance, Gale, *On the Nature and Existence of God*, 15–200. For defenses of the argument from experience against some of the standard arguments for believing that God does not exist, see Gellman, *Experience of God*, 122–201; Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*, 115–42.

54. Bertrand Russell, *Religion and Science* (London: Oxford University Press, 1935), 188.

55. Evan Fales argues for a sociological explanation of mystical experience based on the work of I. M. Lewis. See Fales’s articles “Scientific Explanations of Mystical Experiences, Part I: The

conflicting claims about the nature of the ultimate reality they experienced makes it likely that *all* such putative experiences of an ultimate reality are unreliable at best and delusive at worst.<sup>56</sup>

Sri Ramakrishna's teachings contain several lines of response to these criticisms of premise 4.<sup>57</sup> From the object side, Sri Ramakrishna adopts the responsible fideist position that rational attempts to disprove God's existence are unsuccessful. For instance, as I will argue at length in the next chapter, Sri Ramakrishna provides a sophisticated refutation of evidential arguments from evil against God's existence.

From the subject side, Sri Ramakrishna explicitly addresses the charge of critics such as Russell, who claim that the psychological abnormality of mystics makes their testimony unreliable. Against such arguments, Sri Ramakrishna maintains that mystics and saints who constantly think of God are, in general, perfectly sane: "One doesn't lose consciousness by thinking of Him who is all Spirit, all Consciousness. Śivanāth once remarked that too much thinking about God confounds the brain. Thereupon I said to him, 'How can one become unconscious by thinking of Consciousness?'" (*K* 64 / *G* 115–16). From Sri Ramakrishna's perspective, mystics are generally sane and mentally balanced, so there is no reason to suspect that they would be prone to hallucinations. As Gutting points out, the burden is on critics such as Russell to prove that all or most mystics have suffered from psychological disorders.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, in section V of this chapter, I attempt to defuse the conflicting claims objection to premise 4 by appealing to Sri Ramakrishna's unique standpoint of *vijñāna*: if different mystics experience different forms and aspects of *one and the same* impersonal-personal Infinite Reality, then their apparently conflicting claims about the ultimate reality can be shown to be complementary.

C. D. Broad and Gellman, among others, have defended premise 5 of the argument from experience.<sup>59</sup> Broad argues as follows:

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Case of St Teresa," *Religious Studies* 32.2 (1996), 143–63, and "Scientific Explanations of Mystical Experiences, II: The Challenge to Theism," *Religious Studies* 32.3 (1996), 297–313.

56. See note 95 below.

57. For a sustained defense of premise 4 of the argument from experience against various objections, see Jerome Gellman, *Mystical Experience of God: A Philosophical Inquiry* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), 39–102.

58. Gutting, *Religious Belief and Religious Skepticism*, 160–61.

59. C. D. Broad, "The Appeal to Religious Experience," in *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, ed. William Rowe and William Wainwright (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), 310–14; Galen Pletcher, "Agreement among Mystics," *Sophia* 11.2 (July 1972), 5–15; Gellman, *Experience of God and the Rationality of Theistic Belief*, 52–56.

When there is a nucleus of agreement between the experiences of men in different places, times, and traditions, and when they all tend to put much the same kind of interpretation on the cognitive content of these experiences, it is reasonable to ascribe this agreement to their all being in contact with a certain objective aspect of reality *unless* there be some positive reason to think otherwise.<sup>60</sup>

Broad formulates a principle of agreement that he takes to be uncontroversially true: the evidence in favor of the veridicality of any experience is enhanced to the extent that people in diverse circumstances claim to have the same experience. For instance, if I claim to see a plane in the sky, the evidence in favor of the veridicality of my experience is enhanced if people from neighboring towns also claim to see a plane at the same time and in the same location in the sky. Broad argues that since this principle of agreement applies to all experiences, it applies to experiences of God as well. Therefore, if numerous people in diverse circumstances claim to experience God, then the evidence in favor of the veridicality of experiences of God is enhanced.

Many of Sri Ramakrishna's remarks and teachings support premise 5 of the argument from experience. The fact that "Rāmprasād and other devotees had the vision of the Divine Mother" convinced Sri Ramakrishna, at an early stage in his spiritual practice, that he could realize Her as well (*LP* I.ii.64 / *DP* 211). He would also frequently teach that in the ultimate nondual state, "all jackals howl in the same way" (*LP* II.ii.24 / *DP* 742). That is, mystics of all traditions who have attained the nondual state largely agree in their claims about what they experience. Moreover, Sri Ramakrishna emphasized that "people have realized God in various ways" (*K* 742 / *G* 702). For Sri Ramakrishna, the fact that so many spiritual seekers in vastly different traditions claim to have realized God in various forms and aspects provides strong evidence not only that God exists but that God can be experienced directly.

Philosophers such as Flew argue that the conflicting claims objection to premise 4 also undermines premise 5, since it shows that mystics frequently do not agree on what they claim to experience.<sup>61</sup> For instance, Advaitic mystics claim to experience the nondual Ātman, Buddhist mystics claim to experience *nibbāna*, while Christian and theistic Hindu mystics claim to experience the loving personal God. In section V, I will develop a response to this conflicting claims objection from the standpoint of Sri Ramakrishna.

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60. Broad, "The Appeal to Religious Experience," 313.

61. See note 95 below.

In sum, then, Sri Ramakrishna not only endorses a simple version of the argument from experience but also supports the premises of the more elaborate argument from experience discussed by recent philosophers. However, we should recall from section I that Sri Ramakrishna was a responsible fideist who believed that reason is too weak an instrument to provide a conclusive argument either for or against God's existence. His specific stance on the rational force of the argument from experience accords with his general position of responsible fideism. Accordingly, he remarks, "People don't trust a man when he speaks about God. Even if a great soul affirms that he has seen God, still the average person will not accept his words" (*K* 175 / *G* 211). As this statement suggests, Sri Ramakrishna believed that while the argument from experience is not rationally compelling for everyone, it can nonetheless strengthen the rational grounds for belief in God's existence of those who are religiously or spiritually inclined.

#### IV. The Cross-Checkability Objection

One of the most important objections to premise 2 of the argument from experience is the cross-checkability objection. C. B. Martin provides an early formulation of this objection: "It is only when one comes to such a case as knowing God that the society of tests and checkup procedures, which surround other instances of knowing, completely vanishes. What is put in the place of these tests and checking procedures is an immediacy of knowledge that is supposed to carry its own guarantee."<sup>62</sup> According to Martin, sensory experiences are a valid source of beliefs about things in the external world because these beliefs can be cross-checked in various ways—by determining "what other people see," and so on.<sup>63</sup> By contrast, experiences of God are *not* a valid source of beliefs about God precisely because these experiences cannot be cross-checked. Indeed, Martin claims that mystics dogmatically—but wrongly—insist that their experiences of God are "self-authenticating" and hence do not require cross-checking of any sort.<sup>64</sup>

It is fairly easy to rebut Martin's objection. First, Martin is simply wrong in making the sweeping assertion that all mystics take their experiences of God to be self-authenticating. As I pointed out in the previous section, mystics such as Sri Ramakrishna and Teresa claimed to have had different types of mystical experiences, some of which were self-authenticating and others which were not. Moreover, as Oakes has shown, there is nothing logically incoherent in the idea

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62. C. B. Martin, *Religious Belief*, 70.

63. C. B. Martin, *Religious Belief*, 72.

64. C. B. Martin, *Religious Belief*, 83.

of a self-authenticating experience of God. Second, Martin is also mistaken in claiming that mystics never employ cross-checking procedures.<sup>65</sup> As we will see, mystics have in fact employed an array of checking procedures to verify the veridicality of their (non-self-authenticating)<sup>66</sup> experiences of God.

More recently, a number of philosophers such as Fales, Gale, and Anthony O'Hear have refined the cross-checkability objection to avoid the obvious problems in Martin's formulation of the objection.<sup>67</sup> According to Fales, for instance, mystics such as Teresa *do* often employ cross-checking procedures, but these cross-checking procedures are inadequate because they have no "epistemic bite."<sup>68</sup> On this basis, Fales argues that experiences of God do not stand on an epistemic footing even remotely comparable to sensory experiences, for which there are "[m]ore direct and independent cross-checks."<sup>69</sup>

O'Hear singles out two such direct and independent cross-checks for sensory experiences that do not apply to experiences of God:

The likelihood of an objective reality being causally related to certain experiences will be very much increased if (i) we are able to predict accurately further experiences of our own or others due to our assuming the existence of the reality, (ii) some of these future experiences of our own are experiences of senses other than the original sense involved, and (iii) other people can corroborate what we are perceiving. . . . The religious interpretation of religious experience, however, comes off quite badly under all three conditions.<sup>70</sup>

Let us call condition (iii) the "other observers" test and conditions (i) and (ii), taken together, the "predictive efficacy" test.<sup>71</sup> According to O'Hear, the fact that

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65. Wainwright makes this point against C. B. Martin in *Mysticism* (85).

66. I add the qualification "non-self-authenticating," since self-authenticating experiences of God, by definition, do not require cross-checking.

67. Fales, "Mystical Experience as Evidence"; Gale, *On the Nature and Existence of God*, 302–43; Anthony O'Hear, *Experience, Explanation and Faith: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (London: Routledge, 1984), 25–55.

68. Fales, "Mystical Experience as Evidence," 34.

69. Fales, "Mystical Experience as Evidence," 34.

70. O'Hear, *Experience, Explanation and Faith*, 45–46.

71. I borrow the term "other-observers test" from William Alston, "Religious Experience Justifies Religious Belief," in *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Michael Peterson and Raymond VanArragon (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 144. For other formulations of the other-observers test, see Fales, "Mystical Experience as Evidence"; Gale, *On the Nature and Existence of God*, 302; and O'Hear, *Experience, Explanation and Faith*, 45–46. For appeals

both tests apply to sensory experiences while *neither* test applies to experiences of God suggests a fundamental disanalogy between sensory experiences and experiences of God.<sup>72</sup> For instance, if I claim to see a blue pen, my claim can be subjected to the other-observers test: another person can cross-check my claim by standing near me and checking to see whether there is in fact a blue pen where I claim to see it. Moreover, both I myself and others can subject my claim to a variety of predictive efficacy tests. For instance, I can check whether I can write a sentence on a piece of paper using the blue pen I claim to see. I can also test whether someone feels pain when I poke his forearm with the same perceived pen. According to O'Hear and others, since experiences of God cannot be subjected to tests such as these, premise 2 of the argument from experience is unjustified.

Alston provides a sophisticated response to this seemingly plausible cross-checkability objection. According to Alston, critics such as Fales, Gale, and O'Hear make two fundamental mistakes. First, they are guilty of "epistemic imperialism," since they make the unwarranted assumption that claims based on experiences of God must be subject to the same kind of cross-checks used for sensory experiences.<sup>73</sup> As Alston puts it, "there is no reason to suppose it *appropriate* to require the same checks and tests for them [reports of perception of God] as for sense-perceptual reports, and every (or at least sufficient) reason to suppose it *inappropriate*."<sup>74</sup> Most fundamentally, since God cannot be perceived by the physical senses, it is unreasonable to suppose that reports of experiences of God should be subject to cross-checks meant to verify reports of sensory experiences.<sup>75</sup> Second, Alston contends that critics employ a "double standard" when they fault mystics for employing cross-checks that are epistemically circular, because they overlook the fact that the cross-checks employed in sense-perceptual practice are *equally* epistemically circular.<sup>76</sup> Let us return to the example of my claiming to see a blue pen. Suppose that another person standing near me also claims to see a blue pen in the precise location where I claim to see it. Clearly, this other-observers test is epistemically circular, since my very perception of the other person is also a sensory experience, which cannot be cross-checked independently of sense-perceptual practice itself.<sup>77</sup>

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to the predictive efficacy test, see Fales, "Mystical Experience as Evidence," 27, and O'Hear, *Experience, Explanation and Faith*, 45–46.

72. There are, of course, many other cross-checking procedures besides these two. See the list of eleven tests for sensory experiences in Gale, *On the Nature and Existence of God*, 302.

73. Alston, *Perceiving God*, 216.

74. Alston, *Perceiving God*, 216.

75. For a good discussion of this point, see Gellman, *Mystical Experience of God*, 26–27.

76. Alston, *Perceiving God*, 249–50. For a similar argument, see Wainwright, *Mysticism*, 105.

77. See Alston, *Perceiving God*, 211.

Alston goes a long way toward defending the epistemic force of mystical checking procedures. I will argue that we can fortify Alston's line of response to the cross-checkability objection by considering carefully the array of checking procedures employed by Sri Ramakrishna to verify his (non-self-authenticating) experiences of God. Let us begin by considering Fales's pungent formulation of the cross-checkability objection: "When St. Teresa is receiving an inner locution, we can't call on St. John of the Cross to contemplate and independently confirm the message Teresa says God is sending. St. John of the Cross checks he's not."<sup>78</sup> Alston's charge of epistemic imperialism is surely apt here: since the other-observers test is generally appropriate only for sense-perceptual practice, Fales is unjustified in assuming that the inapplicability of the other-observers test to experiences of God impugns their epistemic credentials.

I would also argue, however, that Fales is overhasty in assuming that *no* experiences of God can be subjected to the other-observers test. In fact, at least one of Sri Ramakrishna's mystical experiences *was* cross-checked directly by another mystic. In 1864, a monk named Jaṭādhāri, who worshipped Rāmlālā (the infant form of Rāma), stayed with Sri Ramakrishna in Dakshineswar. Remarkably, both Sri Ramakrishna and Jaṭādhāri simultaneously saw the Divine Rāmlālā eating, playing, and engaging in mischief, just like a human baby. Sri Ramakrishna recounted his time with Jaṭādhāri as follows:

As the days passed, I felt that Rāmlālā loved me more and more. As long as I remained with Bābāji [Jaṭādhāri], Rāmlālā was happy and playful. But whenever I left and went to my own room, he followed me there at once. He wouldn't remain with Jaṭādhāri, even though I ordered him not to come with me. I thought at first that this must be an illusion. For how could the Deity whom Jaṭādhāri had worshipped for so long with such devotion love me more than him? But it was not my imagination. I actually saw Rāmlālā as I see you—now dancing ahead of me, and now following me. (*LP* II.i.28 / *DP* 574)

Although Sri Ramakrishna initially doubted his mystical vision of Rāmlālā playing in front of him, the vision was so powerful and so prolonged that he felt compelled to take it as veridical. Moreover, Sri Ramakrishna points out that Jaṭādhāri himself saw Rāmlālā behave and move exactly as Sri Ramakrishna saw him do so:

On some days Jaṭādhāri would cook food to offer Rāmlālā, but couldn't find him. Then he would come running in distress to my room, and

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78. Fales, "Mystical Experience as Evidence," 34.



there would be Rāmlālā playing on the floor. Jaṭādhāri's feelings were terribly hurt. . . . Then one day Jaṭādhāri came to me, crying with joy, and said: "Rāmlālā has revealed himself to me in a way that I have never known before but have always longed for. Now the desire of my life is fulfilled. Rāmlālā says he won't go away from here; he doesn't want to leave you. But I'm not sad about it anymore. He lives happily with you and plays joyfully, and I am full of bliss when I see him this way." (*LP* II.i.33–34 / *DP* 579)

Jaṭādhāri, to use Fales's phrase, was Sri Ramakrishna's "St. John of the Cross-checks." Since Jaṭādhāri himself attested to seeing Rāmlālā playing with Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Ramakrishna's mystical vision of Rāmlālā meets even Fales's stringent standard for an other-observers test. In this case, two mystics mutually verified each other's experience of God.

On another occasion, Sri Ramakrishna's mystical vision of the Divine Goddess Durgā was partially cross-checked by several *nonmystics*. In the autumn of 1885, the devotee Surendra Mitra received Sri Ramakrishna's approval to perform Durgā Pūjā in Surendra's own house. Since Sri Ramakrishna was very ill at the time, he was unable to attend Surendra's Pūjā in person. Sri Ramakrishna was speaking to devotees and listening to devotional music in the Shyampukur house when suddenly, at the exact moment of the *sandhi pūjā* (7:30 p.m. on *aṣṭamī*, the second day of the worship of Durgā), he stood up and went into deep *samādhi* for about half an hour. Immediately thereafter, Sri Ramakrishna told the devotees present what he saw in *samādhi*:

A luminous path opened from this place to Surendra's house. I saw the presence of the Divine Mother in the image; She had been evoked by Surendra's devotion. A ray of light beamed forth from Her third eye! Rows of lamps were lit before the goddess in the worship hall. In the courtyard Surendra was crying piteously "Mother, Mother!" All of you, go to his house right now. When he sees you he will regain his peace of mind. (*LP* I.ii.96 / *DP* 240)<sup>79</sup>

This is a very interesting case of a divine vision that also involved an element of telesthesia (remote viewing)—seeing distant things and events which could not possibly be seen with the physical eyes. Sri Ramakrishna claimed that during his *samādhi*, he not only saw the actual Goddess Durgā manifested in the image worshipped by Surendra but also saw some of the people and physical objects

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79. Sri Ramakrishna provides a similar account of the incident at *K* 916 / *G* 849.

near the divine image. Hence, in principle, other people could cross-check Sri Ramakrishna's claims about at least some of the things and events he saw in *samādhi*. This is precisely what happened when Sri Ramakrishna's devotees went to Surendra's house:

Narendra and some others bowed down to the Master, then left for Surendra's house. When they asked Surendra, they learned that rows of lamps had in fact been lit in the worship hall as described by the Master. And when the Master had been in *samādhi*, Surendra was indeed seated in the courtyard facing the image, loudly crying "Mother, Mother," like a boy, for about an hour. The amazed devotees were thrilled with joy when they found that the Master's vision during *samādhi* was consistent with external events. (*LP* I.ii.96 / *DP* 241)

In this case, the empirically verifiable elements of Sri Ramakrishna's vision of Durgā—particularly Surendra's behavior during the *sandhi pūjā* and the lighting arrangement in the worship hall—were successfully cross-checked by other people. The fact that certain aspects of Sri Ramakrishna's mystical vision met the stringent other-observers test insisted on by critics such as O'Hear counts as significant evidence in favor of its veridicality.

Of course, the nature and circumstances of both Sri Ramakrishna's vision of Durgā in Surendra's house and his and Jaṭādhārī's shared mystical vision of Rāmlālā were highly unusual, which is why they could be cross-checked by others. It would be unreasonable in the extreme to expect that all or even most experiences of God could be subjected to such a direct other-observers test. Nonetheless, the fact that some of Sri Ramakrishna's experiences of God which *could* be cross-checked by others *were* successfully cross-checked strengthens the evidential case for the veridicality of his many other experiences of God, which could not, even in principle, be cross-checked by others in such a direct manner.

Interestingly, Sri Ramakrishna himself would frequently encourage people to employ an *indirect* checking procedure to verify whether a given mystic's experience of God is veridical. He claims that anyone can verify a mystic's claims by engaging in intensive spiritual practice and experiencing God for oneself through God's grace:

People don't trust a man when he speaks about God. Even if a great soul affirms that he has seen God, still the average person will not accept his words. He says to himself, "If this man has really seen God, then let him show Him to me." But can a man learn to feel a person's pulse in one day? He must go about with a physician for many days; only then can he distinguish the different pulses. He must be in the company of those with whom

the examination of the pulse has become a regular profession. Can anyone and everyone pick out a yarn of a particular count? If you are in that trade, you can distinguish in a moment a forty-count thread from a forty-one. (*K* 175 / *G* 211)

Sri Ramakrishna recognizes that many people will not believe that a mystic has really experienced God unless the mystic is able to provide direct verification of his experience. However, this expectation is unreasonable, since God is not a physical object that can be seen by anyone at any time. Rather, Sri Ramakrishna maintains that God is a supersensuous Being who typically reveals Himself only to those who have purified themselves through intense austerity and spiritual practice.<sup>80</sup> Just as the ability to distinguish a forty-count thread from a forty-one count thread requires expertise in yarn, the ability and willingness to purify oneself and make oneself fit to realize God require a *spiritual* aptitude that can only be acquired gradually through rigorous ethical and spiritual training.

Of course, this rather arduous checking procedure differs quite significantly from the more direct other-observers test for sensory experiences. If I see a blue pen at time *t*, then anyone with sight should also be able to see the same blue pen at *t*. In contrast, as Alston points out, “there is no set of conditions such that if God is present to me at time *t*, then any other person satisfying those conditions would also perceive God at *t*.”<sup>81</sup> No doubt mystics have specified that certain qualities such as humility, compassion, and love for God are *conducive* to realizing God, but most mystics—including Sri Ramakrishna—also insist that God-realization is only possible through God’s grace.<sup>82</sup> A critic such as Fales might object that this very element of contingency in the mystical checking procedure makes it much less reliable than the other-observers test for sensory experiences. However, as Alston has shown, it would be a form of epistemic imperialism to judge the validity of this mystical checking procedure using the standards of sense-perceptual practice.<sup>83</sup> Hence, the mere fact that mystical checking procedures differ considerably from sensory checking procedures does not impugn the epistemic reliability of the former.<sup>84</sup>

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80. See also *K* 429 / *G* 429.

81. Alston, “Religious Experience Justifies Religious Belief,” 144.

82. Sri Ramakrishna would frequently make remarks such as the following: “Through selfless work, love of God grows in the heart. Then, through God’s grace, one realizes God in course of time” (*K* 56 / *G* 109).

83. Alston, “Religious Experience Justifies Religious Belief,” 144. See also Gellman, *Mystical Experience of God*, 30–32.

84. It is important to note that Alston does not claim that *all* doxastic practices—no matter how bizarre or implausible—enjoy prima facie rationality and, hence, that their respective checking procedures are epistemically reliable. According to Alston, a doxastic practice loses its claim

Sri Ramakrishna also frequently mentions another test for the veridicality of experiences of God that is analogous to the predictive efficacy test for sensory experiences. According to Sri Ramakrishna, those who have realized God are likely to exhibit an abundance of saintly qualities, such as purity, selflessness, and compassion. Let us call this the saintly fruits test. Sri Ramakrishna observes: “Those whose spiritual consciousness has been awakened never make a false step. They do not have to reason in order to shun evil. They are so full of love of God that whatever action they undertake is a good action. They are fully conscious that they are not the doers of their actions, but mere servants of God” (*K* 163 / *G* 201). Sri Ramakrishna specifically points out that the realization of God results in the total eradication of selfish passions such as lust and anger.<sup>85</sup> Take, for instance, this dialogue between him and the devotee Vijay:

VIJAY: “Well, sir, what becomes of the lust, anger, and other passions of one who keeps the ‘servant I’?”

MASTER: “If a man truly feels like that, then he has only the semblance [*ākār mātra*] of lust, anger, and the like. If, after attaining God, he looks on himself as the servant or the devotee of God, then he cannot injure anyone. By touching the philosopher’s stone a sword is turned into gold. It keeps the appearance of a sword but cannot injure.” (*K* 122 / *G* 171)

Sri Ramakrishna’s view on this issue is quite nuanced: while a saint who has realized God may sometimes *seem* to exhibit anger or desire, such anger or desire is a mere “semblance.” Clearly, Sri Ramakrishna would reject any simplistic external “test” of saintliness: since saintliness is an internal state, it is not easy to judge

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to *prima facie* rationality, for instance, if it comes into conflict with another more established doxastic practice (such as sense-perceptual practice). For instance, he claims that the outmoded practice of predicting the future by inspecting animal entrails has “fallen by the wayside” because most of its predictions have been empirically disconfirmed by means of sense-perceptual practice (Alston, *Perceiving God*, 172). Alston argues, however, that it is rational to engage in any doxastic practice “that is socially established, that yields outputs that are free from massive internal and external contradiction, and that demonstrates a significant degree of self-support” (Alston, *Perceiving God*, 184). According to Alston, the Christian mystical doxastic practice enjoys *prima facie* rationality, because it meets all of these conditions. He also leaves open the possibility that non-Christian mystical doxastic practices may meet these conditions as well (Alston, *Perceiving God*, 274–75). Throughout this chapter, I presuppose that the Hindu mystical doxastic practice enjoys at least as much *prima facie* rationality as the Christian mystical doxastic principle, but it is obviously beyond the scope of this chapter to justify this presupposition. For a sustained attempt to justify the *prima facie* rationality of the Theravāda Buddhist mystical doxastic practice, see Mark Webb, *A Comparative Doxastic-Practice Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2015).

85. See, for instance, *K* 931 / *G* 862.

another's moral and spiritual condition from the outside. Just as some people may feign saintly qualities in order to deceive others, other people may in fact be saintly but behave in such a way as to lead people to believe that they are far from saintly. Nonetheless, Sri Ramakrishna maintains that anyone who has truly realized God would never engage in grossly unethical or selfish conduct. This is clear from the fact that he rejected a monk's claim to have realized Brahman on the grounds that the monk was having an affair with a woman (*LP* I.i.38 / *DP* 428).

Conversely, if someone who claims to have experienced God exhibits saintly qualities such as purity and selflessness, and we have no good reason to think that the person is trying to deceive us, then the evidential case for the veridicality of that person's experience of God is strengthened. According to Sri Ramakrishna, "He who has realized God does not look upon woman with the eye of lust. . . . He perceives clearly that women are but so many aspects of the Divine Mother" (*K* 118 / *G* 168). Sri Ramakrishna's own saintliness in this regard is illustrated by a striking incident in which some prostitutes attempted to seduce him: "The Master told us that when he saw those women he saw only the Divine Mother; saying, 'Mother, Mother,' he lost external consciousness. . . . They [the prostitutes] felt guilty for attempting to break his continence and with tearful eyes begged his forgiveness" (*LP* I.ii.96 / *DP* 241).

Fales, however, questions the epistemic force of the saintly fruits test:

[W]e must ask whether a theist has the right to help himself to the presumption that God would be likely to grant the observed gifts to His mystics. Even setting aside the uncertainties produced by God's freedom to do as He wills, the answer is that the theist does not. The evils we observe in this world force him to remain deeply agnostic with respect to our understanding of what God's purposes require. So this probability is unknown: theists can't claim such knowledge here, but disavow it when faced with the problem of evil.<sup>86</sup>

According to Fales, if a theist appeals to the inscrutability of God's purposes when confronted with the problem of evil, the theist cannot claim to know that God would grant saintly fruits to those who have experienced Him. However, I would argue that there are at least two good reasons for believing that the experience of God is likely to yield saintly fruits, neither of which requires any knowledge of God's purposes.

First, qualities such as humility, selflessness, and saintliness are precisely what one would expect to result from a mystical experience that shifts one's center of

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86. Fales, "Mystical Experience as Evidence," 32.

attention and devotion away from the egoistic self to God.<sup>87</sup> As Sri Ramakrishna puts it, those who have realized God “never make a false step,” because they are “fully conscious that they are not the doers of their actions, but mere servants of God” (*K* 163 / *G* 201). Similarly, Gellman plausibly claims that “when one experiences God typically one experiences the decentering of one’s self, to some degree or other, so that God can be one’s value center.”<sup>88</sup> Since the line of reasoning adopted by Sri Ramakrishna and Gellman does not involve speculation about God’s purposes, it is not vulnerable to Fales’s objection.

Second, Gutting has convincingly argued that if God “is indeed an extraordinarily good, wise, and powerful being, there is reason to think that intimate contact with it [God] will be of great help in our efforts to lead good lives.”<sup>89</sup> In other words, if we are truly in contact with God, then God’s goodness should rub off on us. Sri Ramakrishna strengthens Gutting’s argument by providing a psychological explanation of *why* a mystic who has directly experienced God and thinks of God constantly tends to exhibit divine qualities such as love and compassion. According to Sri Ramakrishna, “One acquires the nature of whatever one thinks about intensely. If one thinks of God day and night, one will acquire the nature of God” (*K* 700 / *G* 657). Here again, the line of argument defended by Gutting and Sri Ramakrishna sidesteps Fales’s objection, since it is based on an empirical claim that makes no assumptions about God’s purposes.

Sri Ramakrishna also occasionally employed a unique checking procedure that is rarely found in the world’s mystical literature. In order to resolve his doubts about the veridicality of a particular experience he took to be of God, he would sometimes appeal directly to God and immediately have *another* mystical experience in which God Himself confirmed the veridicality of his earlier mystical experience. Take Sri Ramakrishna’s description of one such occasion:

At Jadu Mallik’s garden house Narendra said to me, “The forms of God that you see are a fiction of your mind.” I was amazed and said to him, “But they speak too!” Narendra answered, “Yes, one may think so.” I went to the temple and wept before the Mother. “O Mother,” I said, “what is this? Then is this all false? How could Narendra say that?” Instantly I had a revelation. I saw Consciousness—Indivisible Consciousness—and a divine being formed of that Consciousness [*takhan dekhiye dile—caitanya—akhaṇḍa caitanya—caitanyaṁ rūp*]. The divine form said to me, “If your words are untrue, how is it that they tally with the facts?” Thereupon I said to

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87. For a helpful discussion of this issue, see Gellman, *Mystical Experience of God*, 32–33.

88. Gellman, *Experience of God*, 75.

89. Gutting, *Religious Belief and Religious Skepticism*, 152.

Narendra: “You rogue! You created unbelief in my mind. Don’t come here any more.” (*K* 826 / *G* 772)

When Narendra raised a doubt in Sri Ramakrishna’s mind that the divine forms he saw were hallucinations, Sri Ramakrishna prayed to the Divine Mother and had a confirmatory mystical experience in which the Divine Mother Herself revealed to him that the various forms of God are real manifestations of the Divine Consciousness.<sup>90</sup> Indeed, one such divine form even spoke to Sri Ramakrishna and explicitly confirmed the veridicality of his earlier divine visions.

On another occasion, Sri Ramakrishna employed yet another checking procedure to determine whether the voice he heard was actually God’s:

There is no outsider here. The other day, when [the devotee] Hariś was with me, I saw Saccidānanda come out of this body. It said, “I incarnate Myself in every age.” I thought that I myself was saying these words out of mere fancy. I kept quiet and watched. Again Saccidānanda Itself spoke, saying, “Caitanya [the *avatāra*], too, worshipped Śakti.” . . . I saw that it is the fullest manifestation of Saccidānanda; but this time the Divine Power is manifested through the glory of *sattva*. (*K* 762 / *G* 720)

When Sri Ramakrishna first had a mystical vision of the Divine Saccidānanda speaking to him, he wondered whether he might have hallucinated what he heard. In order to determine whether the words he heard were actually God’s, he “kept quiet and watched” and found that Saccidānanda spoke again of its own accord. He then became convinced that what he heard was not a product of his own mind.

Sri Ramakrishna’s checking procedure in this case is strikingly similar to one that was often employed by Saint Teresa. According to Teresa, the phenomenological difference between a veridical and a nonveridical divine locution is as stark as the difference between listening and speaking:

There seems to me to be the same difference as between speaking and listening, neither more nor less. For . . . when I am speaking, my intellect goes on arranging what I am saying; but if I am spoken to, I do no more than effortlessly listen. The false locution is like something that we cannot clearly make out; it is as if we were asleep; but when God speaks, the voice is so clear that not a syllable of what He says is lost.<sup>91</sup>

90. For a similar incident when Haladhārī doubts the veridicality of Sri Ramakrishna’s visions, see *K* 131 / *G* 175 and *LP* I.ii.88 / *DP* 233.

91. Teresa of Ávila, *The Life of Saint Teresa of Ávila by Herself*, trans. J. M. Cohen (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1958), 351.



The seasoned mystic, Teresa claims, can easily distinguish a nonveridical divine locution from a veridical one by employing two checking procedures. First, the mystic should check whether the intellect is actively “arranging” the words. Second, the mystic should check the clarity of the locution. If the mystic hears a very clear divine voice simply through effortless listening, then the mystic can be sure that the locution is veridical. Teresa’s method of effortless listening should remind us of Sri Ramakrishna’s method of keeping the mind quiet and receptive in order to check the veridicality of a putatively divine locution. The fact that Sri Ramakrishna and Teresa—mystics belonging to different religious traditions and ages—employed the same kind of checking procedure strengthens its epistemic reliability. One might object that such a checking procedure is unreliable because it leaves too much room for self-deception and error. However, there is no reason to assume that a checking procedure must be infallible in order for it to be valuable. Indeed, as Alston rightly points out, “[t]ests of the accuracy of sense perceptions don’t always settle the matter definitively either.”<sup>92</sup> In order to avoid employing a double standard, we have to grant that checking procedures for *both* sensory experiences *and* experiences of God may have some value in spite of being fallible.

Finally, Sri Ramakrishna would sometimes confirm the veridicality of his mystical experiences by checking whether they agreed with religious scriptures or by consulting his spiritual preceptor. When Sri Ramakrishna met his first guru, Bhairavī Brāhmaṇī, he told her all about his spiritual experiences, including the accompanying physical symptoms such as sleeplessness and a burning sensation in his body. Doubting the veridicality of his spiritual experiences, he asked her: “Mother, what are these things that keep happening to me? Am I mad, really? Have I truly developed this terrible disease by wholeheartedly calling on the Divine Mother?” She responded as follows:

Who calls you mad, my son? This is not insanity. You have achieved *mahābhāva* [ecstatic love of God], and that is why you are having all these experiences. . . . Śrī Rādhā experienced this state and so did Śrī Caitanya. All this is recorded in the *bhakti* scriptures. I have all these books with me. I will read them to you and prove that whoever has sincerely yearned for God has experienced these states, and everyone doing so must pass through them. (*LP* I.ii.107–8 / *DP* 253–54)

In response to Sri Ramakrishna’s questions, Bhairavī Brāhmaṇī reassured him that his experiences of God were veridical and that they were in perfect accordance

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92. Alston, “Religious Experience Justifies Religious Belief,” 143.

with Hindu devotional scriptures such as the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*.<sup>93</sup> This is a checking procedure frequently employed by mystics of different traditions, including Teresa.<sup>94</sup> Of course, a critic might object that such a checking procedure lacks epistemic force, since it presupposes without justification that the mystic's spiritual preceptor and his or her tradition's scriptures are themselves reliable. However, Alston's argument applies here: since sense-perceptual cross-checks are also epistemically circular, critics would be guilty of applying a double standard if they dismiss mystical cross-checks, but *not* sense-perceptual cross-checks, for exhibiting the vice of epistemic circularity.

In this section, I have argued that Sri Ramakrishna's mystical testimony lends considerable support to premise 2 of the argument from experience. Critics such as Fales and O'Hear, as we have seen, attempt to refute premise 2 on the grounds that there are adequate cross-checks for sensory experiences but not for experiences of God. I have tried to defuse this objection by drawing on Alston's arguments and Sri Ramakrishna's detailed reports of his mystical experiences. Alston makes a convincing case that it is unreasonable to expect most experiences of God to be subject to the same kinds of cross-checks employed in sense-perceptual practice. Hence, the fact that the array of checking procedures employed by mystics such as Sri Ramakrishna usually differ significantly from the checking procedures for sensory experiences does not diminish the epistemic reliability of the former. However, Sri Ramakrishna's mystical testimony also shows that some (admittedly rare) experiences of God *can*, in principle, be cross-checked in a direct and independent manner by others. For instance, as we have seen, Sri Ramakrishna's vision of Rāmlālā was confirmed by the mystic Jaṭādhāri, while Sri Ramakrishna's vision of the Goddess Durgā was partly confirmed by a group of nonmystics who found that the physical entities he saw in his vision were, in fact, present where and when he claimed to see them. Both these unique instances of cross-checking arguably meet even the stringent standards for an other-observers test demanded by many critics of the argument from experience.

## V. The Conflicting Claims Objection

Numerous philosophers have challenged premises 4 and 5 of the argument from experience on the grounds that mystics have made conflicting claims about the nature of ultimate reality on the basis of their mystical experiences.<sup>95</sup> Although

93. See a similar incident at *LP* I.ii.92–93 / *DP* 237–38, when the Bhairavī Brāhmaṇī confirms Sri Ramakrishna's vision of Caitanya and Nityānanda by appealing to the *Caitanya Bhāgavata*.

94. See *The Life of Saint Teresa of Ávila by Herself*, 239.

95. See Flew, *God and Philosophy*, 126–27; Michael Martin, "The Principle of Credulity and Religious Experience," 87–88; Fales, "Scientific Explanations of Mystical Experiences, Part I," 143.

all theistic mystics agree that the ultimate reality which they experience is a loving personal God, some of these theistic mystics claim to have experienced God as Christ, others as Allah, and still others as Kṛṣṇa, Kālī, or Śiva. In stark contrast to all of these theistic mystics, Advaitic mystics claim to have experienced their absolute identity with the impersonal nondual Brahman. Many Buddhist mystics, meanwhile, claim to have realized *śūnyatā* or *nibbāna*. According to the conflicting claims objection, since such claims about the nature of ultimate reality are mutually exclusive, the mystical experiences on which these claims are based are unreliable at best and delusive at worst.

It is important, first, to determine how damaging the conflicting claims objection would be if it were successful. Even if mystical claims about the ultimate reality do turn out to conflict, it would be unreasonable to conclude that all experiences of the ultimate reality are delusive. Take the following example. At exactly the same time, three people claim to see a flying object at the same location in the sky, but one of them claims that it is a bird, another claims that it is a plane, and the third person claims that it is a kite.<sup>96</sup> The fact that the reports of these three people conflict with each other does not support the conclusion that all of their experiences are delusive or that there *is* no flying object at all.<sup>97</sup> Rather, it would be far more plausible to conclude that there *is* very likely a flying object which all three people report having seen but that their respective claims about the object's *precise nature* are unreliable. Similarly, if the conflicting claims objection is successful, it would not establish that these mystics probably failed to experience any ultimate reality at all. Rather, the objection would only impugn the reliability of the specific claims mystics have made about the precise nature of ultimate reality.

Philosophers have suggested a variety of responses to the conflicting claims objection. In this section, I will critically examine the responses of Caroline Franks Davis, Hick, Gellman, and Wainwright, and I will then defend a novel strategy for rebutting the conflicting claims objection along Ramakrishnan lines—a strategy that can be seen as combining elements from the arguments of Gellman and Wainwright.

Davis attempts to defuse the conflicting claims objection by identifying a broadly theistic “common core” of all experiences of God across religious traditions.<sup>98</sup> All these diverse mystical experiences, in spite of their significant

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96. My example is very similar to the examples found in Kai-Man Kwan, “Can Religious Experience Provide Justification for the Belief in God? The Debate in Contemporary Analytic Philosophy,” *Philosophy Compass* 1.6 (2006), 655, and in Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 317.

97. This point is well made in Gellman's *Experience of God* (111–12) and Kwan's “Can Religious Experience Provide Justification for the Belief in God?” (654–55).

98. Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*, 166–92. For similar arguments in favor of a theistic “common core,” see Kwan, “Can Religious Experience Provide Justification for the Belief in God?,” 655–56 and Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 266.

differences, consist in a “union or harmonious relation” with a “holy power,” which she takes to be the personal God.<sup>99</sup> According to Davis, then, while the claims of some mystics may conflict, this conflict is largely superficial because their *experiences* generally do not conflict. However, Davis’s thesis of broad theism denies the self-understanding of nontheistic mystics such as Advaitins and Buddhists, who would not describe their mystical experiences of ultimate reality in theistic terms.<sup>100</sup> Davis betrays her theistic bias when she favors Rāmānuja’s theistic interpretation of “*Tat tvam asi*” to Śaṅkara’s Advaitic interpretation.<sup>101</sup>

Hick, as we saw in chapter 4, reconciles apparently conflicting mystical experiences of ultimate reality by appealing to a quasi-Kantian “common core” framework. According to Hick, all mystics experience different phenomenal forms of one and the same unknowable Real *an sich*. Since different mystics perceive the Real *an sich* in various ways depending on their respective cultural and theological backgrounds, their claims about the nature of ultimate reality often differ at the phenomenal level. Nonetheless, these mystical claims do not conflict with one another, since they stem from differences in the subjective makeup of the mystics themselves. While Hick’s quasi-Kantian ontology provides an elegant solution to the conflicting claims problem, the solution comes at a very steep cost, since it downgrades the ontological status of the ultimates of the various world religions to phenomenal status.<sup>102</sup> The vast majority of mystics claim to have experienced God as a fully objective reality, not as a merely phenomenal “mask” of an unexperienceable noumenon.

Gellman’s strategy for responding to the conflicting claims objection seems to me to be much more promising than the strategies of Davis and Hick. Gellman defends the possibility that different mystics experience different real aspects of God but that God is at the same time an “inexhaustible plenitude” that is “beyond—infinately beyond—what is disclosed in any experience of Him.”<sup>103</sup> Gellman formulates his hypothesis as follows:

[O]ut of God’s inexhaustible plenitude He has the innate power to appear as either personal or as impersonal. Or to put it differently, God has an “aspect” which is personal and an “aspect” which is impersonal. Out of the plenitude can emerge either of these aspects in the absence of the other. . .

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99. Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*, 191.

100. For an elaboration of this criticism of Davis, see Jones, *Philosophy of Mysticism*, 69.

101. Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*, 181–82.

102. See Gellman’s criticism of Hick in *Experience of God* (115) as well as my first criticism of Hick’s quasi-Kantian theory in section IV of chapter 4.

103. Gellman, *Experience of God*, 116.

Unlike Hick, therefore, we are prepared to entertain the thought that God *Himself* is experienced both as a personal being and as an impersonal being.<sup>104</sup>

From Gellman's perspective, mystics sometimes make conflicting claims about the nature of God because God reveals different aspects of Himself to different mystics. At the same time, many mystics also get an intimation that God is an "inexhaustible plenitude" *beyond* whatever particular aspect of God is disclosed to them. According to Gellman, when mystics claim that their experience of God is "ineffable," they are "responding to that aspect of their perception of God in which God is known to be an inexhaustible plenitude, a plenitude only intimated but not open to view."<sup>105</sup> Gellman points out that his theory of God as an "inexhaustible plenitude" is only a "plausible possibility," which awaits further substantiation and potential revision.<sup>106</sup>

Gellman's response to the conflicting claims objection has a number of attractive features. Unlike Davis, Gellman does not reduce all mystical experiences to a theistic common core, since he maintains that God reveals His impersonal aspect to nontheistic mystics. Moreover, unlike Hick, Gellman grants robust ontological reality to the various ultimates experienced by the world's mystics. The primary weakness of Gellman's theory is that it is a speculative hypothesis that is not sufficiently grounded in the reports of mystics themselves. In particular, Gellman fails to provide any evidence from the testimony of mystics to support his controversial claim that when mystics refer to their experiences as "ineffable," they mean to signal God's "inexhaustible plenitude." Contrary to Gellman, I would argue that when mystics such as Teresa or Sri Ramakrishna claim that their experience of God is ineffable, what they usually mean is that there are certain features of their experience of God—such as a feeling of bliss or an overwhelming conviction of God's reality or presence—which cannot be adequately conveyed in words.<sup>107</sup> Hence, while I believe that Gellman's appeal to God's inexhaustible plenitude is the best way to respond to the conflicting claims objection, his attempt to justify his theory by relying on the ineffability claim of mystics is unconvincing. The fact is that most mystics have *not* described the ultimate reality as an "inexhaustible plenitude" with both personal and impersonal aspects.

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104. Gellman, *Experience of God*, 119.

105. Gellman, *Experience of God*, 117.

106. Gellman, *Experience of God*, 119.

107. It is in this sense that Teresa describes her mystical experience as "indescribable" (*The Life of Saint Teresa of Avila by Herself*, 139). See also James's discussion of the ineffability of mystical experiences in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (380).

This is precisely where Sri Ramakrishna comes in. Sri Ramakrishna's mystical testimony and teachings, I would suggest, significantly strengthen Gellman's line of response to the conflicting claims objection. Sri Ramakrishna's experience of "various aspects and forms" of the Infinite Reality (*LP* I.ii.160 / *DP* 304) provides direct experiential confirmation of Gellman's hypothesis of God's inexhaustible plenitude.<sup>108</sup> As we have seen in the previous chapters of this book, Sri Ramakrishna enjoyed numerous theistic experiences, including mystical union with the loving personal God as well as visions of Kālī, Rāma, Kṛṣṇa, Sītā, Caitanya, Śiva, and Christ. He also had the Advaitic experience of the impersonal Brahman in the exalted state of *nirvikalpa samādhi*. Unlike Advaita Vedāntins, however, Sri Ramakrishna did not infer from his Advaitic experience that his earlier theistic experiences were illusory or lower experiences. Moreover, he also had the unique theo-monistic experience of *vijñāna*, the spiritual realization that the Infinite Reality is at once the static impersonal Brahman and the dynamic Śakti which has become the entire universe.

On the basis of his numerous mystical experiences, Sri Ramakrishna taught that the Infinite God is both personal and impersonal, both with and without form, and "much more besides" (*ābār kato ki*) (*K* 602 / *G* 577). Sri Ramakrishna's phrase "much more besides" corresponds closely to Gellman's notion of God's "inexhaustible plenitude": since God is infinite, no one can ever experience the *whole* of God, but we *can* experience certain real aspects of the Infinite God. As we saw in the previous chapter, Sri Ramakrishna taught that God is a "*bhakta-vatsal*" who reveals Himself to mystics in the form or aspect they love most (*K* 101 / *G* 149–50). From Sri Ramakrishna's perspective, then, mystics' diverse claims about the nature of ultimate reality are complementary rather than conflicting: the Infinite God reveals His impersonal aspect to Advaitic and Buddhist mystics while He reveals His personal aspect to theistic mystics.

Unlike Gellman, however, Sri Ramakrishna does *not* claim that all or even most mystics experience God as an inexhaustible plenitude. Rather, Sri Ramakrishna claims that only a spiritual elite of "*īśvarakoṭis*" are able to attain the expansive realization of *vijñāna*, the experience of the Infinite God as simultaneously the impersonal Brahman, the personal Śakti, *and* an inexhaustible plenitude beyond both personality and impersonality.<sup>109</sup> In fact, he points out that many ordinary mystics adopt narrow, and often conflicting, views about the ultimate reality on the basis

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108. Stephen Phillips hints at this Ramakrishnan response to the conflicting claims objection when he suggests, in the context of Sri Aurobindo's philosophy, that "diverse experiences might be viewed in good faith as veridical of the *same* object." *Aurobindo's Philosophy of Brahman* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1986), 40.

109. For a detailed elaboration of this point, see my discussion of VV1 in section III of chapter 1.

of their limited mystical experiences: "Each devotee forms his view of God on the basis of his own particular experience of God. In reality, however, different views of God do not conflict" (*K* 100 / *G* 149). Many Advaitic mystics, who have experienced the ultimate reality as the impersonal Brahman, claim that the ultimate reality is *only* impersonal. By contrast, many theistic mystics, who have experienced the ultimate reality as the personal God, claim that the ultimate reality is *only* personal. From Sri Ramakrishna's broader standpoint of *vijñāna*, the mistake that these mystics make is to limit God to what they have experienced of Him.

In order to pursue further the philosophical implications of Sri Ramakrishna's perspective on this issue, I will draw on an insightful suggestion made by Wainwright. Addressing the conflicting claims objection, Wainwright observes: "We must remember that the only relevant conflicts are conflicts between claims which are *immediately* supported by religious experience. Many of the conflicting claims which people try to support by appealing to mystical or numinous experience are not *immediately* supported by it."<sup>110</sup> Wainwright draws a very helpful distinction between mystical claims about the ultimate reality which are "immediately" supported by mystical experience and those which are not. Wainwright's distinction helps clarify Sri Ramakrishna's strategy for reconciling mystical claims about the nature of ultimate reality.

According to Sri Ramakrishna, theistic mystics are justified in claiming that the ultimate reality is personal and Advaitic mystics are also justified in claiming that the ultimate reality is impersonal, since both these claims are immediately supported by their respective mystical experiences of ultimate reality. However, from Sri Ramakrishna's perspective of *vijñāna*, these claims do not conflict, since the ultimate reality is an inexhaustible plenitude with both personal and impersonal aspects. In contrast, the dogmatic Advaitic claim that the ultimate reality is *only* impersonal *does* conflict with the dogmatic theistic claim that the ultimate reality is *only* personal. However, Sri Ramakrishna would maintain that neither of these dogmatic claims is immediately supported by the experience of ultimate reality. Since no one can experience the whole of the Infinite God, no mystic is ever justified in limiting God to what they have experienced of Him. Just as the blind men in Sri Ramakrishna's parable are blind to the fact that the elephant is more than the small part of the elephant they are touching, many mystics are blind to the fact that God is infinitely more than the particular form or aspect of God they have experienced.

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110. Wainwright, *Mysticism*, 109–10. Wainwright asserts, without justification, that the claims "the Ātman-Brahman is the ground of being" and "Nibbāna is real" are not "immediately warranted by the religious experiences upon which they are (partly) based" (*Mysticism*, 110). I think Sri Ramakrishna, by contrast, would take these claims to be immediately supported by mystical experience.



Sri Ramakrishna's response to the conflicting claims objection, then, can be seen as combining Gellman's thesis of God's inexhaustible plenitude with Wainwright's distinction between claims that are immediately supported by mystical experience and those that are not. Sri Ramakrishna's numerous mystical experiences strongly support Gellman's hypothesis that God, out of His inexhaustible plenitude, reveals His personal aspect to theistic mystics and His impersonal aspect to nontheistic mystics. Unlike Gellman, however, Sri Ramakrishna maintains that this expansive realization of God as the impersonal-personal Infinite Reality is available only to *vijñānī* mystics such as Sri Ramakrishna himself. In contrast to such *vijñānī*-s, most mystics have tended to experience the ultimate reality *either* as personal *or* as impersonal, but rarely as both simultaneously.

Sri Ramakrishna also holds, in the spirit of Wainwright, that any truly conflicting claims about the nature of ultimate reality—such as a theistic mystic's claim that the ultimate reality is *only* personal or an Advaitic mystic's claim that the ultimate reality is *only* impersonal—are not immediately supported by mystical experiences of the ultimate reality. Theistic experiences of God justify only the more modest claim that the ultimate reality has a real personal aspect, while Advaitic experiences of Brahman justify only the more modest claim that the ultimate reality has a real impersonal aspect. From Sri Ramakrishna's standpoint of *vijñāna*, these more modest claims are complementary rather than conflicting, since they capture different aspects of the same impersonal-personal Infinite Reality. Contemporary philosophers would do well to explore this promising Ramakrishnan strategy for defending premises 4 and 5 of the argument from experience against the conflicting claims objection.

The philosophical literature on the epistemology of mystical experience is vast, and this chapter has only begun to explore how Sri Ramakrishna's unique mystical perspective can contribute to recent discussions and debates. My defense of the possibility of self-authenticating experiences of God in section II can be further developed and fortified by drawing on the testimony of a wider range of mystics who claim to have had such experiences. Moreover, there are numerous objections to the argument from experience that were not addressed in this chapter, such as the objection that experiences of God can best be explained in terms of naturalistic causes such as infantile regression or the desire for sociopolitical power.<sup>111</sup> Chapters 5 and 6 have shown, at the very least, that Sri Ramakrishna's extensive mystical testimony and teachings are an invaluable—and still largely untapped—resource for philosophers investigating the nature and epistemology of mystical experience.

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111. See Fales's naturalistic objection to the argument from experience in his two articles "Scientific Explanations of Mystical Experiences, Part I" and "Scientific Explanations of Mystical Experiences, II." Gellman (*Experience of God*, 122–49, and *Mystical Experience of God*, 75–102) and Davis (*The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*, 193–238) provide strong refutations of naturalistic objections.



# IV THE PROBLEM OF EVIL



## 7

SRI RAMAKRISHNA'S MULTIDIMENSIONAL  
RESPONSE TO THE PROBLEM OF EVILSKEPTICAL THEISM, SAINT-MAKING THEODICY,  
AND THE PANENTHEISTIC STANDPOINT  
OF VIJ ÑĀNA

The problem of evil has been a topic of perennial concern for theologians and philosophers of religion: if God is omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good, why is there so much evil in the world? Many religious believers view the problem of evil as a practical challenge to preserve and deepen their faith in a loving God in the face of often horrific evil and suffering. Others, by contrast, formulate the problem of evil as an argument against the very existence of God.<sup>1</sup>

Recent analytic philosophers have made a helpful distinction between logical and evidential arguments from evil against God's existence.<sup>2</sup> J. L. Mackie, for instance, argues that the very existence of evil in the world is logically incompatible with the existence of an omnipotent and perfectly good God.<sup>3</sup> By contrast, philosophers such as William Rowe have defended different forms of the evidential argument from evil: the fact that there are certain *kinds* of evil in the world—such as apparently pointless evil—constitutes evidence that an omnipotent and perfectly good God does not exist.<sup>4</sup> Recent philosophers tend to agree

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1. I draw here on Daniel Howard-Snyder's helpful distinction between "theoretical" and "practical" problems of evil in his article, "God, Evil, and Suffering," in *Reason for the Hope Within*, ed. Michael J. Murray (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 217–37.

2. See, for instance, Daniel Howard-Snyder, ed., *The Evidential Argument from Evil* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), xi–xx.

3. J. L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," *Mind* 64 (April 1955), 200–212. For other formulations of the logical problem of evil, see Antony Flew, *God and Philosophy* (New York: Prometheus Books, [1966] 2005), 48 and H. J. McCloskey, "The Problem of Evil," *Journal of Bible and Religion* 30 (1962), 187.

4. See William Rowe's two articles "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, ed. Howard-Snyder, 1–11, and

that the evidential argument from evil poses a greater threat to theism than the logical argument from evil, which is widely taken to have been refuted.<sup>5</sup>

Theistic responses to arguments from evil usually take one of two forms: refutation or theodicy. A refutation attempts to show that a given formulation of the argument from evil fails. In the recent analytic literature, one of the most popular and sophisticated strategies for refuting arguments from evil has been skeptical theism, a position defended by philosophers such as William Alston and Stephen Wykstra.<sup>6</sup> The skeptical theist targets a key premise of the argument from evil—namely, the premise that an omnipotent and perfectly good God would have prevented certain instances of evil that we see in the world. The skeptical theist refutes this premise by appealing to human cognitive limitations: since we are not always capable of understanding the ways and motives of an omnipotent and omniscient being, we are not rationally justified in believing that God had no morally sufficient reason for permitting a particular instance of evil.

In contrast to refutation, a theodicy provides a positive explanation of why God permits evil and suffering.<sup>7</sup> It is important to note, however, that refutation

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“The Evidential Argument from Evil: A Second Look,” in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, ed. Howard-Snyder, 262–85.

5. See, for instance, William Alston, “The Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition,” in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, ed. Howard-Snyder, 97–125; Michael Tooley, “The Problem of Evil,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2015 edition (<http://plato.stanford.edu>). Justin McBrayer provides a succinct explanation of why the logical problem of evil fails: “It is widely conceded that there is no logical problem of evil for the following reason: if there is a God, he would allow any particular instance of evil that is necessary either to avoid some evil equally bad or worse or to secure some compensating (or justifying) good. For instance, the experience of pain is an intrinsic evil. However, the fact that a human father allows his child to experience the pain of an inoculation does not *thereby* show that the father is not perfectly good. That is because, although evil in itself, the pain was necessary to secure a compensating good, namely being immune to a painful or deadly disease.” “Skeptical Theism,” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (<http://www.iep.utm.edu>) (accessed 9 January 2018).

6. See, for instance, Alston, “The Inductive Argument from Evil”; Stephen Wykstra, “The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of Appearance,” *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 16.2 (1984), 73–93; Daniel Howard-Snyder, “Epistemic Humility, Arguments from Evil, and Moral Skepticism,” *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion* 2 (2009), 17–57; Trent Dougherty and Justin McBrayer, eds., *Skeptical Theism: New Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); and Justin McBrayer, “Skeptical Theism,” *Philosophy Compass* 5.7 (2010), 611–23.

7. Michael Peterson et al. similarly contrast theodicy with “defense,” which corresponds to what I call “refutation”: “*Defense* aims at establishing that a given formulation of the argument from evil fails; *theodicy* offers an account or explanation of why God allows suffering and evil.” Michael Peterson et al., eds., *Reason and Religious Belief*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 155.

and theodicy are not necessarily mutually exclusive.<sup>8</sup> Christian philosophers and theologians since Saint Augustine have proposed a variety of theodicies that strive to explain, within a Christian theological framework, how God's love and omnipotence are compatible with all the evil we see in the world.

Max Weber was one of the first Western scholars to recognize the importance of Indian contributions to theodicy—particularly the doctrines of *karma* and re-birth, which explain how one's present suffering is the result of one's own past deeds, either in this life or in a previous life.<sup>9</sup> Taking Weber's lead, numerous recent scholars have examined a variety of Indian theodicies, especially the classical Vedāntic theodicies of the Advaitin Śaṅkara and the Viśiṣṭādvaitin Rāmānuja.<sup>10</sup>

However, scholars have almost entirely ignored Sri Ramakrishna's sophisticated and original response to the problem of evil.<sup>11</sup> Through a careful examination of relevant passages from the *Kathāmṛta*, I will reconstruct the three basic dimensions of Sri Ramakrishna's response: first, a skeptical theist refutation of evidential arguments from evil; second, what I call a "saint-making" theodicy;

8. Alston, for instance, argues for the compatibility of skeptical theism and theodicy in "The Inductive Argument from Evil," 99. In the beginning of section III of this chapter, I argue that Sri Ramakrishna's skeptical theism is compatible with his theodicy.

9. Max Weber, *The Religion of India: The Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism*, trans. Hans Gerth and Don Martindale (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1958), 121. For the original German book first published in 1916, see Max Weber, *Die Wirtschaftsethik der Weltreligionen*, vol. 2: *Hinduismus und Buddhismus: 1916–1920* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1996), 1–378. See section II of this chapter for a brief discussion of Weber's understanding of Indian *karma*-based theodicies.

10. Arthur Herman, *The Problem of Evil and Indian Thought* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1976); Roy Perrett, "Karma and the Problem of Suffering," *Sophia* 24.1 (1985), 4–10; Francis X. Clooney, "Evil, Divine Omnipotence, and Human Freedom: Vedānta's Theology of Karma," *Journal of Religion* 69.4 (October 1989), 530–48; B. K. Matilal, "A Note on Śaṅkara's Theodicy," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 20 (1992), 363–76; Bruce Reichenbach, *The Law of Karma: A Philosophical Study* (London: Macmillan, 1990); Purushottama Bilimoria, "Toward an Indian Theodicy," in *A Companion to the Problem of Evil*, ed. Justin McBrayer and Daniel Howard-Snyder (Hoboken: Wiley, 2013), 302–17.

11. As far as I am aware, the only scholars who have discussed Sri Ramakrishna's response to the problem of evil are Satis Chandra Chatterjee and Jeffery D. Long. See Satis Chandra Chatterjee, *Classical Indian Philosophies: Their Synthesis in the Philosophy of Sri Ramakrishna* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta Press, 1985), 126–29, and Jeffery D. Long, "Like a Dog's Curly Tail: A Hindu Theodicy in the Tradition of Sri Ramakrishna," in *Comparing Faithfully: Insights for Systematic Theological Reflection*, ed. Michelle Voss Roberts (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 107–25. Long rightly finds affinities between Sri Ramakrishna's theodicy and John Hick's soul-making theodicy—affinities I will discuss at length in section III of chapter 8. Chatterjee emphasizes the importance of the doctrines of *karma* and *līlā* and of the pantheistic standpoint of *vijñāna* in Sri Ramakrishna's theodicy. In this chapter, I will discuss these aspects of Sri Ramakrishna's theodicy in much greater detail than Chatterjee does, and I will also reconstruct Sri Ramakrishna's skeptical theist position and his saint-making theodicy, which are not discussed by Chatterjee.



third, a mystical theodicy based on the panentheistic standpoint of *vijñāna*. Section I sets the stage for my reconstruction by outlining briefly the classical Vedāntic theodicies of Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja. At the heart of Śaṅkara's theodicy is an appeal to the law of *karma*: since God places His creatures in favorable and unfavorable circumstances in strict accordance with the law of *karma*, creatures themselves are responsible for the evil and suffering in the world. Rāmānuja's theodicy appeals not only to the law of *karma* but also to the concept of *līlā*, God's "sportive play." At various points in the chapter, I indicate affinities and divergences between Sri Ramakrishna's theodicy and the theodicies of Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja.

Section II reconstructs the skeptical theist dimension of Sri Ramakrishna's response to the problem of evil. Several of Sri Ramakrishna's visitors presented him with evidential arguments from evil: the existence of instances of apparently pointless evil—such as Genghis Khan's slaughter of nearly a hundred thousand innocent people—makes it reasonable to believe that an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good God does not exist. In response, Sri Ramakrishna points out that it is unreasonable to expect that the ways and motives of an omniscient and omnipotent God—particularly God's motives for permitting particular instances of evil—will always be transparent to finite human intellects. I argue that Sri Ramakrishna's response is best understood as a skeptical theist refutation of the inference at the heart of the evidential argument from evil—the inference from "I cannot think of any morally sufficient reason for God to have permitted evil *E*" to "There *is* no morally sufficient reason for God to have permitted evil *E*."

Sri Ramakrishna's skeptical theism dovetails with a full-blown theodicy, which I reconstruct in sections III through V. Section III delineates his saint-making theodicy: God permits evil in the universe, according to Sri Ramakrishna, "in order to create saints" (*K* 37 / *G* 97). Since God has created this world as an environment for saint-making, evil is as necessary to the world as good. Through the experience of good and evil, we gradually learn to combat our own evil tendencies and cultivate ethical and spiritual virtues that bring us closer to God. I explain how Sri Ramakrishna's doctrines of *karma*, rebirth, and universal salvation all play a crucial role in his saint-making theodicy.

Section IV addresses an apparent problem for Sri Ramakrishna's saint-making theodicy that stems from his denial of free will. As a theological determinist, Sri Ramakrishna maintains that God is the sole Doer and that ignorant people mistakenly think of themselves as doers. It might seem, however, that the saint-making journey emphasized in Sri Ramakrishna's theodicy would be pointless without free will. I argue that the key to reconciling Sri Ramakrishna's theological determinism with his saint-making theodicy lies in his thesis that ignorant people are under the *illusion* that they are free. Their illusion of free will leads them to feel

morally responsible for their actions, and this feeling of moral responsibility is sufficient to ensure the meaningfulness of the saint-making process.

Sri Ramakrishna's response to the problem of evil culminates in a mystical theodicy of *viññāna*, which is outlined in section V. The panentheistic experience of *viññāna* revealed to him that God has become everything in the universe. As a *viññānī*, Sri Ramakrishna affirms that God Himself sports in the form of both evildoers and their victims, so the problem of evil—which generally presupposes a difference between God and His suffering creatures—does not even arise. I also clarify how his mystical theodicy of *viññāna* complements both his skeptical theism and his saint-making theodicy. Finally, section VI addresses three potential objections to Sri Ramakrishna's approach to the problem of evil.

## I. *Karma* and *Līlā* in the Classical Vedāntic Theodicies of Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja

This section will outline briefly the theodicies of the Advaita Vedāntin Śaṅkara and the Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedāntin Rāmānuja in order to contextualize Sri Ramakrishna's theodicy and set into relief its most distinctive features. In his commentary on *Brahmasūtra* 2.1.34, Śaṅkara considers the following objection to the Vedāntic view that God is the cause of the universe: If God were the cause of the universe, then He would be guilty of partiality and cruelty, since "He creates an unjust world by making some, e.g. gods and others, experience happiness, some e.g. animals etc., experience extreme misery and some, e.g. human beings, experience moderate happiness and sorrow."<sup>12</sup> *Sūtra* 2.1.34, which Śaṅkara interprets as a response to this objection, runs as follows: "*vaiṣamyanairghṛṇye na sāpekṣatvāt tathā hi darśayati*" ("No partiality and cruelty [can be charged against God] because of [His] taking other factors into consideration. For so the Vedas show").<sup>13</sup> Śaṅkara admits that God *would* be open to the charge of partiality and cruelty if He created this "erratic world by Himself, irrespective of other factors."<sup>14</sup> However, according to Śaṅkara, God makes this "unequal creation" in accordance with the law of *karma*:

No fault attaches to God, since this unequal creation is brought about in conformity with the virtues and vices of the creatures that are about

12. Śaṅkarācārya, *Brahmasūtram: Śaṅkarabhāṣyopetam* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2007), 217; Śaṅkarācārya, *Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya of Śrī Śaṅkarācārya*, trans. Swami Gambhirananda (Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2006), 362.

13. Śaṅkarācārya, *Brahmasūtram*, 217; Śaṅkarācārya, *Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya*, 363.

14. Śaṅkarācārya, *Brahmasūtram*, 217; Śaṅkarācārya, *Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya*, 363.

to be born. Rather, God is to be compared to rain. Just as rainfall is a general cause for the growth of paddy, barley, etc., the special reasons for the differences of paddy, barley, etc., being the individual potentiality of the respective seeds, similarly God is the general cause [*sādhāraṇaṃ kāraṇaṃ*] for the birth of gods, men, and others, while the individual fruits of works associated with the individual creatures are the specific causes [*asādhāraṇāni kāraṇāni*] for the creation of the differences among the gods, men, and others. Thus God is not open to the defects of partiality and cruelty, since He takes other facts into consideration.<sup>15</sup>

This passage represents the core of Śaṅkara's theodicy: since God creates and rules the universe in accordance with the law of *karma*, creatures themselves—rather than God—are responsible for the evil and suffering in the world.<sup>16</sup> Invoking the analogy of rain, Śaṅkara argues that God is only the “general cause” of the universe, while the virtues and vices of creatures are responsible for the “differences among the gods, men, and others.”

However, several recent scholars have pointed out a serious problem in Śaṅkara's theodical appeal to the law of *karma*. According to B. K. Matilal, “the *sāpekṣatva* ‘dependence’ thesis which BS 2.1.34 underlines and which Śaṅkara amplifies as God's dependence upon the *Karma* of the creatures, seriously delimits, i.e., restricts God's omnipotence, which will not be shared by any of the Biblical religions, Judaism, Christianity, or Islam.”<sup>17</sup> In other words, Śaṅkara's *karma*-based theodicy saves the perfect goodness of God at the expense of His perfect omnipotence.<sup>18</sup> Developing Matilal's objection to Śaṅkara a bit further, we can articulate a more general dilemma facing all *karma*-based theodicies, Śaṅkara's or otherwise. On the one hand, if God is constrained by the *karma* of creatures, then His omnipotence would seem to be curtailed. On the other hand, if God *can* sometimes suspend or violate the law of *karma*, then the problem of evil re-emerges. That is, if God could have prevented certain cases of evil and suffering from occurring by suspending the law of *karma* in those cases, why didn't He? If the answer, say, is that God suspends or modifies the *karmic* consequences

15. Śaṅkarācārya, *Brahmasūtram*, 217; Śaṅkarācārya, *Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya*, 363.

16. For an elaboration, see Matilal, “A Note on Śaṅkara's Theodicy.”

17. Matilal, “A Note on Śaṅkara's Theodicy,” 368–69. For a similar argument, see Bilimoria, “Toward an Indian Theodicy,” 310.

18. A similar problem arises in Western theodicies. See, for instance, John Stuart Mill's criticism of Leibniz's theodicy in *Three Essays on Religion*, 4th ed. (London: Longmans, Green, Reader, & Dyer, 1875), 40 n.

of the actions of only those creatures whom He favors or who have earned His grace, then God is once again open to the charge of partiality.

Interestingly, Rāmānuja's theodicy begins not with *Brahmasūtra* 2.1.34—as Śaṅkara's does—but with 2.1.32, “*na prayojanavattvāt*” (“[Brahman is] not the cause [of the universe], owing to the need of some motive [for creation]”). This *sūtra*, Rāmānuja claims, represents a *pūrvapakṣin* (prima facie) position against the Vedāntic view that Brahman is the cause of the universe. According to this *pūrvapakṣin*, Brahman cannot be the cause of the universe, because the creator of the universe requires a motive to create, and Brahman—being perfectly contented—does not possess any motives. Rāmānuja clarifies this *pūrvapakṣin* position by specifying that Brahman could have only one of two motives: the motive of benefiting Himself or the motive of benefiting His creatures. Brahman could not have created the universe with the motive of benefiting Himself, since “all His wishes are eternally fulfilled.”<sup>19</sup> Significantly, Rāmānuja broaches the problem of evil in the context of articulating the reason why Brahman could not have created the universe with the motive of benefiting His creatures either:

No merciful divinity would create a world so full, as ours is, of evils of all kind—birth, old age, death, hell, and so on. If it created at all, pity would move it to create a world altogether happy. Brahman thus having no possible motive cannot be the cause of the world.<sup>20</sup>

We can express Rāmānuja's formulation of the problem of evil in the following syllogism:

1. If a merciful God were the creator of the universe, He would have created a world devoid of evil, since such a world would be maximally beneficial to His creatures.
2. The universe is full of evils of various kinds.
3. Therefore, a merciful God is not the creator of the universe.

According to Rāmānuja, *sūtra* 2.1.33—“*lokavattu līlā kaivalyam*” (“But [creation, for Brahman, is] mere sport, like what is seen in the world”—refutes the *pūrvapakṣin* position of 2.1.32. The Vedāntic position embodied in 2.1.33, which

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19. Rāmānuja, *Śrībhāṣyam*, vol. 2, ed. Lalitakrishna Goswami (Delhi: Chaukhamba, 2000), 736. For the English translation, see Rāmānuja, *The Vedānta-Sūtras with the Commentary by Rāmānuja: Part III*, trans. and ed. George Thibaut (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1904), 477.

20. Rāmānuja, *Śrībhāṣyam*, vol. 2, 736; Rāmānuja, *The Vedānta-Sūtras*, 477.

Rāmānuja endorses, is that Brahman creates the universe with the sole motive of sportive play (*līlā*):

We see in ordinary life how some great king, ruling this earth with its seven *dvīpas* [continents], and possessing perfect strength, valor, and so on, has a game at balls, or the like, from no other motive than to amuse himself; hence, there is no objection to the view that sportive play [*līlā*] alone is the motive prompting Brahman to the creation, sustenance, and destruction of this world which is easily fashioned by His mere will.<sup>21</sup>

Rāmānuja claims that God created this universe in order to amuse Himself, not in order to benefit either Himself or others. Hence, the specific problem of evil that arose in the context of elaborating the *pūrvapakṣin* position of 2.1.32 is refuted: the undeniable fact that the universe is full of evil does not contradict the creatorship of Brahman, since Brahman created the universe not with any specific motive but in a spirit of playfulness. As Rāmānuja recognizes, however, the appeal to God's *līlā* in *sūtra* 2.1.33 raises *another* problem of evil, which is both raised and refuted in the subsequent *sūtra* 2.1.34 (already cited in the discussion of Śāṅkara above). This new problem of evil can be stated as follows: If God created a universe full of evil solely to amuse Himself, He would be guilty of both cruelty and partiality. God would be cruel, since He could have created a universe with much less evil, and God would be partial, since He permits some of His creatures to suffer far more than others. Like Śāṅkara, Rāmānuja refutes this new problem of evil by appealing to the law of *karma*: God is not responsible for the suffering endured by His creatures, since this suffering is the *karmic* consequence of their own previous actions.<sup>22</sup>

One might object, however, that Rāmānuja's theodical appeal to the doctrines of *līlā* and *karma* is not an adequate response to the problem of evil. Why did God build the law of *karma* into His *līlā* in the first place if He knew that this law would entail so much suffering for His creatures? If God were perfectly good, He would have devised a better *līlā* with little or no suffering. As Arthur Herman puts it, "It is therefore legitimate to ask, 'When Brahman, through *līlā*, expressed His joy, why didn't He do it better?' If He is perfect He could, and if He's good, He would want to—so why didn't He? We are back again with T.P.E. [the problem of evil]."<sup>23</sup> If Śāṅkara's *karma*-based theodicy is vulnerable to the charge

21. Rāmānuja, *Śrībhāṣyam*, vol. 2, 736; Rāmānuja, *The Vedānta-Sūtras*, 477.

22. Rāmānuja, *Śrībhāṣyam*, vol. 2, 740–43; Rāmānuja, *The Vedānta-Sūtras with the Commentary by Rāmānuja*, 477–79.

23. Herman, *The Problem of Evil and Indian Thought*, 270.

that it restricts God's omnipotence, Rāmānuja's *līlā*- and *karma*-based theodicy invites the charge that God could have devised a much better *līlā* without the law of *karma*, which entails untold suffering for God's creatures (albeit a suffering "earned," in some sense, by the creatures themselves).

Śaṅkara's and Rāmānuja's influential theodicies set the stage for subsequent Indian responses to the problem of evil up to the present. As we will see, Sri Ramakrishna's theodicy—like the theodicies of Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja—appeals to the doctrines of *karma* and *līlā*, but the precise role these doctrines play in his theodicy is distinctive. Sri Ramakrishna's response to the problem of evil also contains unique features that are entirely absent from the theodicies of Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja.

## II. Sri Ramakrishna's Skeptical Theist Refutation of Evidential Arguments from Evil

On two occasions, Sri Ramakrishna explicitly responded to evidential arguments from evil against God's existence. On 14 December 1882, Mahendranāth Gupta related to Sri Ramakrishna the argument from evil posed by the famous Bengali scholar Īśvarcandra Vidyāsāgar (1820–1891):

MAHENDRANĀTH: "Once Vidyāsāgar said in a mood of pique: 'What is the use of calling on God? Just think of this incident: At one time Genghis Khan plundered a country and imprisoned many people. The number of prisoners rose to about a hundred thousand. The commander of his army said to him: "Your Majesty, who will feed them? It is risky to keep them with us. It will be equally dangerous to release them. What shall I do?" Genghis Khan said: "That's true. What can be done? Well, have them killed." The order was accordingly given to cut them to pieces. Now, God saw this slaughter, didn't He? But He didn't stop it in any way. Therefore I don't need God, whether He exists or not. I don't derive any good from Him.'"

SRI RAMAKRISHNA: "Is it possible to understand God's actions and Her motives for acting? [*īśvarer kārya ki bojhā jāi, tini ki uddeśye ki karen?*] She creates, She preserves, and She destroys. Can we ever understand why She destroys? I say to the Divine Mother: 'O Mother, I do not need to understand. Please give me love for Thy Lotus Feet.' The aim of human life is to attain *bhakti*. As for other things, the Mother knows best. I have come to the garden to eat mangoes. What is the use of my calculating the number of trees, branches, and leaves? I only eat the mangoes; I don't need to know the number of trees and leaves." (*K* 127 / *G* 160–61)

According to Vidyāsāgar, there are numerous instances of horrendous evil in this world—such as Genghis Khan’s mass slaughter—that an omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly good being would have prevented. Hence, even if an omniscient and omnipotent God exists, He is not perfectly good.

Put in logical form, Vidyāsāgar’s argument runs as follows:

- (1) There exist instances of horrendous moral evil, such as Genghis Khan’s mass slaughter.
- (2) An omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being would prevent the occurrence of any horrendous moral evil.
- (3) There does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being.<sup>24</sup>

Vidyāsāgar explicitly states (1), and his assertion that God “saw” Khan’s slaughter but “didn’t stop it in any way” implies (2): a perfectly good and omnipotent God *would* have prevented Khan’s mass slaughter. (3) follows logically from (1) and (2) by *modus tollens*.<sup>25</sup> Vidyāsāgar implies (3) in his statement: “Therefore I don’t need God, whether He exists or not. I don’t derive any good from Him.” While Vidyāsāgar admits that a divine being may exist, he believes his argument has established that such a divine being cannot be perfectly good.

Sri Ramakrishna’s response to Vidyāsāgar’s argument from evil is succinct but powerful: “Is it possible to understand God’s actions and Her motives for acting? She creates, She preserves, and She destroys. Can we ever understand why She destroys?” According to Sri Ramakrishna, God’s ways and motives—especially Her motives for permitting the evil and suffering we observe in the world—are inscrutable to our finite intellects. Indeed, it should hardly be a surprise that God’s motives are often inscrutable to us, since the cognitive gulf between our finite minds and the omniscient mind of God is immense. As I already pointed out in chapter 1, Sri Ramakrishna frequently illustrates this cognitive gulf by means of an analogy: “Can a one-seer pot hold ten seers of milk?” (*K* 229 / *G* 257). In a similar vein, Sri Ramakrishna asks, “How can we understand the ways of God through our small intellects?” (*K* 105 / *G* 153).

Using contemporary analytic terminology, I would argue that Sri Ramakrishna’s response to Vidyāsāgar’s argument from evil is best understood

24. Rowe’s influential formulation of the argument from evil helped me reconstruct the logical form of Vidyāsāgar’s argument. See Rowe, “The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism.” For a discussion of Rowe’s argument, see section I of chapter 8.

25. A propositional rendering of the argument form would be: (1) *E*, (2) *G* → ¬*E*, ∴ (3) ¬*G*.



as a form of skeptical theism. Justin McBrayer provides an excellent summary of skeptical theism:

Skeptical theism is the view that God exists but that we should be skeptical of our ability to discern God's reasons for acting or refraining from acting in any particular instance. In particular, says the skeptical theist, we should not grant that *our* inability to think of a good reason for doing or allowing something is indicative of whether or not *God* might have a good reason for doing or allowing something. If there is a God, he knows much more than we do about the relevant facts, and thus it would not be surprising at all if he has reasons for doing or allowing something that we cannot fathom.<sup>26</sup>

The skeptical theist maintains that in light of the vast gulf between the omniscient mind of God and our finite human intellects, our inability to think of a morally sufficient reason for God to have permitted a given instance of evil in no way justifies the assumption that God *had* no morally sufficient reason for permitting that evil.

Sri Ramakrishna adopts precisely such a skeptical theist position in his response to Vidyāsāgar. In particular, Sri Ramakrishna targets Vidyāsāgar's (2): in light of human cognitive limitations, Vidyāsāgar is unjustified in believing that a perfectly good God would prevent any occurrence of horrendous evil, such as Genghis Khan's act of slaughter. From Sri Ramakrishna's skeptical theist perspective, Vidyāsāgar's mistake is to infer from *his* inability to think of a morally sufficient reason for a loving God to permit horrendous evil to the conclusion that God *has* no morally sufficient reason to permit horrendous evil. Vidyāsāgar's inference is unjustified because it is based on an unwarranted confidence in the ability of the finite human mind to comprehend the ways of an omniscient and omnipotent God. Therefore, we have no good reason to believe (2), since an omniscient, omnipotent being may very well have morally sufficient reasons for acting that lie beyond the ken of our finite intellects.

Sri Ramakrishna emphasizes the inscrutability of God's ways at numerous points in the *Kathāmṛta*. He was especially fond of reciting a parable about the warrior Bhīṣma from the epic *Mahābhārata*:

The ways of God are inscrutable indeed. Bhīṣma lay on his bed of arrows. The Pāṇḍava brothers visited him in Kṛṣṇa's company. Presently Bhīṣma burst into tears. The Pāṇḍavas said to Kṛṣṇa: "Kṛṣṇa, how amazing this

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26. McBrayer, "Skeptical Theism," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

is! Our grandsire Bhīṣma is one of the eight Vasus. Another man as wise as he is not to be found. Yet even he is bewildered by *māyā* and weeps at death.” “But,” said Kṛṣṇa, “Bhīṣma isn’t weeping on that account. You may ask him about it.” When asked, Bhīṣma said: “O Kṛṣṇa, I am unable to understand anything of the ways of God; God Himself is the constant companion of the Pāṇḍavas, and still they have no end of trouble. That is why I weep. When I reflect on this, I realize that one cannot understand anything of God’s ways.” (*K* 396 / *G* 397–98)

Notice that this parable specifically concerns the mysteriousness of evil and suffering in God’s creation: Bhīṣma weeps in bewilderment at the fact that the Pāṇḍavas, despite having Kṛṣṇa—God Himself—as their “constant companion,” undergo no end of suffering and hardship. Although Bhīṣma fails to understand why God permits the Pāṇḍavas to suffer so much, he does not arrive at Vidyāsāgar’s conclusion that a perfectly good God does not exist. Rather, as a pious believer in God, Bhīṣma continues to trust in the perfectly loving nature of God and takes his failure to understand the Pāṇḍavas’ suffering as a reflection of his own cognitive limitations and the inscrutability of God’s ways. As a skeptical theist, Sri Ramakrishna encourages people like Vidyāsāgar to adopt Bhīṣma’s pious attitude of humble faith and trust in God. Our inability to understand why God permits certain instances of evil casts doubt not on God’s perfect goodness but on our ability to fathom the ways and motives of an omnipotent, omniscient God.

On a different occasion, Sri Ramakrishna addressed a slightly different evidential argument from evil against God’s existence:

The husband of Maṇi Mallik’s granddaughter was here. He read in a book that God could not be said to be quite wise and omniscient [*jñānī sarvajña*]; otherwise, why should there be so much misery in the world? As regards death, it would be much better to kill a man all at once, instead of putting him through slow torture. Further, the author writes that if he himself were the Creator, he would have created a better world. . . .

Can we ever understand God’s ways? I too think of God sometimes as good and sometimes as bad. She has kept us deluded by Her *Mahāmāyā*. Sometimes She wakes us up and sometimes She keeps us unconscious. . . .

One is aware of pleasure and pain, birth and death, disease and grief, as long as one is identified with the body. All these belong to the body alone, and not to the Ātman. After the death of the body, perhaps God carries one to a better place. It is like the birth of a child after the pain of delivery. Attaining Knowledge of the Ātman, one looks on pleasure and pain, birth

and death, as a dream. How little we understand! Can a one-seer pot hold ten seers of milk? (*K* 229 / *G* 257)

Gupta, the author of the *Kathāmṛta*, specifies in a footnote (*K* 229 n. 1 / *G* 257 n. 3) that the book to which Sri Ramakrishna refers is John Stuart Mill's *Autobiography* (1873), where Mill mentions his father's inability to "believe that a world so full of evil was made by a being of perfect goodness."<sup>27</sup> In his book *Three Essays on Religion* (1874), Mill echoes his father in arguing that God cannot be both omnipotent and perfectly good: "Not even on the most distorted and contracted theory of good which ever was framed by religious or philosophical fanaticism, can the government of Nature be made to resemble the work of a being at once good and omnipotent."<sup>28</sup> Mill claims that if God were both perfectly good and omnipotent, He would not have permitted the various natural evils we see in the world. Mill reconciles God's goodness with the existence of so much natural evil by denying God's omnipotence.<sup>29</sup>

Notice the structural similarity between Vidyāsāgar's and Mill's respective arguments from evil. Both Vidyāsāgar and Mill argue that the sheer magnitude of evil in the world—moral evil for Vidyāsāgar and natural evil for Mill—counts as evidence that God cannot be both omnipotent and perfectly good. However, while Vidyāsāgar accepts God's omnipotence while rejecting God's perfect goodness, Mill accepts God's perfect goodness but denies God's omnipotence. Sri Ramakrishna's first-line response to Mill's argument from evil is identical to his response to Vidyāsāgar's argument: "Can we ever understand God's ways? . . . How little we understand!" In other words, Sri Ramakrishna refutes both Vidyāsāgar's and Mill's respective arguments from evil by adopting a skeptical theist position. According to Sri Ramakrishna, Mill—like Vidyāsāgar—makes the mistake of overlooking human cognitive limitations. As a result, Mill mistakenly infers from his inability to think of a morally sufficient reason for an omnipotent and perfectly good God to permit so much natural evil to the conclusion that God cannot be both omnipotent and perfectly good. Sri Ramakrishna attacks the tacit assumption at the basis of Mill's inference: namely, the assumption that the human intellect can always grasp the ways and motives of an omniscient Being. From Sri Ramakrishna's perspective, it would be more reasonable for Mill to adopt the skeptical theist position that while we are sometimes unable to think of a morally sufficient reason for God to permit certain instances of evil, we are

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27. John Stuart Mill, *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*: vol. 1, *Autobiography and Literary Essays*, ed. John M. Robson and Jack Stillinger (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), 43.

28. Mill, *Three Essays on Religion*, 38.

29. Mill, *Three Essays on Religion*, 40.

not justified in concluding that God *has* no morally sufficient reason to permit these evils.

Interestingly, Sri Ramakrishna also suggests *why* the evil in the world drives so many people—such as Mill and Vidyāsāgar—to be skeptical about God’s existence: “I too think of God sometimes as good and sometimes as bad. She has kept us deluded by Her *Mahāmāyā*. Sometimes She wakes us up and sometimes She keeps us unconscious.” It is important not to take his first statement too literally. Sri Ramakrishna does not actually doubt God’s goodness so much as he emphasizes the sheer delusive power of God’s *Mahāmāyā*. So long as we are “deluded,” we cannot help but question God’s existence or goodness on occasion. Moreover, Sri Ramakrishna’s Bhīṣma parable points the way out of this delusion: by adopting a humble attitude of faith and trust in God, we can gradually overcome our delusion and attain the direct spiritual realization of God’s perfectly loving nature.

Significantly, however, Sri Ramakrishna’s refutation of Mill’s argument from evil does not end with his appeal to skeptical theism. Immediately after making this point about *Mahāmāyā*, Sri Ramakrishna points out that Mill overlooks some possible reasons for God to permit the evils we see in the world. In other words, Sri Ramakrishna hints at the possibility of a specific kind of theodicy. First, he points out that we suffer only so long as we identify with the superficial body-mind complex. In reality, we are not the body-mind complex but the Ātman, the eternal spiritual Self beyond suffering and death. Second, Sri Ramakrishna appeals to the doctrine of rebirth: “After the death of the body, perhaps God carries one to a better place.” After enduring great suffering in this ephemeral life, the transmigrating soul may go to a higher realm and experience a heavenly bliss that compensates it for its previous earthly miseries. Sri Ramakrishna encourages us to take the long view and to see life on earth—with all its joys and sorrows—as but a brief sojourn in the soul’s journey toward God. Third, he indicates that the infinite good of spiritual salvation—the “Knowledge of the Ātman”—outweighs all the finite suffering of this life. As he puts it, “It is like the birth of the child after the pain of delivery.” Sri Ramakrishna here hints at the doctrine of universal salvation which he explicitly endorses at numerous places in the *Kathāmṛta*: since every one of us will eventually attain the salvific knowledge of the Ātman, we can take solace in the fact that the ephemeral suffering of this life pales in comparison to the infinite good of salvation that awaits us all.

In sum, Sri Ramakrishna provides a two-pronged refutation of evidential arguments from evil against God’s existence. First, he defends the skeptical theist position that in light of human cognitive limitations, *even if* we cannot think of a good reason for God to have permitted certain evils we see in the world, we are not justified in inferring that God *had* no good reason for permitting these evils. Second, Sri Ramakrishna argues that proponents of the evidential argument from evil are also unjustified in ruling out the possibility of a theodicy, which *does*

provide a morally sufficient reason for God to have permitted these evils. In order to refute evidential arguments from evil, Sri Ramakrishna only needs to demonstrate that a theodicy is *possible*, not that it is *true*. Moreover, even if we can rule out the possibility of this theodicy, Sri Ramakrishna could still fall back on his skeptical theist argument, which—if successful—would be sufficient on its own to refute evidential arguments from evil.

However, Sri Ramakrishna also frequently makes the stronger claim that his saint-making theodicy—adumbrated in his response to Mill and elaborated in much greater detail in other passages in the *Kathāmṛta*—is not just possible but *true*. What is important to recognize is that his appeal to the truth, as opposed to the mere possibility, of this saint-making theodicy plays no role in his refutation of evidential arguments from evil. Obviously, appealing to the truth of a theodicy would not be an effective means of refuting the evidential argument of evil, since the proponent of the argument from evil can rightly point out that we have no good reason to believe that the theodicy is true. As we will see, however, Sri Ramakrishna appeals to the truth of his saint-making theodicy in conversation not with those who are skeptical of God's existence—such as Vidyāsāgar—but with religious believers who seek to strengthen their faith in God by understanding how God's goodness can be compatible with the existence of evil. In the ensuing discussion of Sri Ramakrishna's saint-making theodicy, it is important to keep in mind the two distinct roles of theodicy in Sri Ramakrishna's overall response to the problem of evil.<sup>30</sup> In his response to the evidential argument from evil, he claims that a theodicy is *possible*, while in his conversations with religious believers, he claims that his saint-making theodicy is *true*.

### III. Sri Ramakrishna's Saint-Making Theodicy

Before examining Sri Ramakrishna's positive theodicy, we first have to determine more precisely how his theodicy relates to his skeptical theism. Indeed, it may seem as if his skeptical theism works at cross-purposes with his theodicy. If the skeptical theist maintains that God's motives for permitting evil are sometimes inscrutable to us, doesn't the theodicist contradict the skeptical theist by specifying what God's motives are?<sup>31</sup> I would suggest, however, that this tension between skeptical

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30. The two uses of theodicy I describe here correspond to what Eleonore Stump calls "defense" and "theodicy" respectively. See her book *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 19–20.

31. Stump, for instance, claims that skeptical theism militates against "the possibility of theodicy in general" (*Wandering in Darkness*, 14). For a similar view, see Scott Coley, "Skeptical Theism Is Incompatible with Theodicy," *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion*

theism and theodicy is only apparent, at least in the case of Sri Ramakrishna. Sri Ramakrishna's skeptical theist position is not a global skepticism about our ability to understand God's motives for acting in general. Rather, his skeptical theism is a purely dialectical refutation of the inference at the heart of evidential arguments from evil against God's existence—namely, the inference from (A) “I can't think of a morally sufficient reason for God to have permitted evil *E*” to (B) “There *is* no morally sufficient reason for God to have permitted evil *E*.” According to Sri Ramakrishna, the inference from (A) to (B) is unjustified because we have no good reason to believe that we *should* always be able to discern the ways and motives of an omniscient, omnipotent God.

As a skeptical theist, then, Sri Ramakrishna maintains that we have no good reason to *believe* (B). As a theodicist, Sri Ramakrishna argues that we also have good reasons to *deny* (B). Notice that these two positions are perfectly compatible: often we have little reason to believe a certain proposition and also some reason to deny that proposition.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, Sri Ramakrishna's skeptical theism and his theodicy should be seen as complementary rather than conflicting.

We can now proceed to examine the details of Sri Ramakrishna's theodicy itself. His first-line theodical response to the question of why God permits evil consists invariably in an appeal to God's “*līlā*.” This dialogue between Sri Ramakrishna and a member of the Brāhmo Samāj is typical:

BRĀHMO: “If ignorance [*avidyā*] is the cause of spiritual unconsciousness [*ajñāna*], then why has God created ignorance [*avidyā*]?”

SRI RAMAKRISHNA: “That is God's *līlā*. The glory of light cannot be appreciated without darkness. Happiness cannot be understood without misery. Knowledge of good is possible because of knowledge of evil. Further, the mango grows and ripens on account of the covering skin. You throw away the skin when the mango is fully ripe and ready to be eaten. It is possible for one to attain gradually to the Knowledge of Brahman because of the covering skin of *māyā*. *Vidyā-māyā* and *avidyā-māyā* are like the skin of the mango. Both are necessary.” (*K* 180 / *G* 216)

In his response to the question of why God created *avidyā*, Sri Ramakrishna states that the universe—which contains both knowledge and ignorance, good and evil, happiness and suffering—is God's *līlā*. Like Rāmānuja, Sri Ramakrishna insists

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77 (2015), 53–63. Against Stump and Coley, I would argue that while some forms of skeptical theism *are* incompatible with theodicy, others—such as Sri Ramakrishna's skeptical theism—are not.

32. I am grateful to Justin McBrayer for making this point clear to me in conversation.

that God created this universe out of sheer sport. Elsewhere in the *Kathāmṛta*, Sri Ramakrishna likens God's *līlā* to a game:

HARI: "Why is there so much suffering in the world?"

SRI RAMAKRISHNA: "This world is the *līlā* of God. It is like a game. In this game there are joy and sorrow, virtue and vice, knowledge and ignorance, good and evil. The game cannot continue if sin and suffering are altogether eliminated from the creation. In the game of hide-and-seek one must touch the 'granny' in order to be free. But the 'granny' is never pleased if she is touched at the very outset. It is God's wish that the play should continue for some time." (*K* 437 / *G* 436)

According to Sri Ramakrishna, God's *līlā* is like a game that needs to be played for a while before somebody wins. Just as a game is not particularly fun if victory is achieved from the outset, God's *līlā* would be short-lived and not all that fun if evil and suffering were absent from the world: since everyone would be innately drawn toward God, they would have achieved liberation right away. By including evil, suffering, vice, and ignorance in Her world-*līlā*, God prolongs the fun of Her sportive play.

Sri Ramakrishna recognizes, however, that this theodical appeal to *līlā* is insufficient on its own, since it does not so much resolve the problem of evil as push it back one level. As we have already seen in the context of Rāmānuja's theodicy, the problem of evil re-emerges in another form: even if God created this universe out of sport, why didn't God devise a better *līlā* that contains little or no suffering? Indeed, the appeal to *līlā*, taken by itself, seems even to *undermine* theodicy by portraying God as a kind of deranged and sadistic child who takes delight in the suffering of his playthings.

Anticipating this objection, Sri Ramakrishna claims that God's world-*līlā* is, in fact, teleologically oriented: both good and evil are necessary in an environment conducive to the ethico-spiritual endeavor to eradicate egoism and to attain the ultimate goal of the Knowledge of Brahman. Just as a "mango grows and ripens on account of the covering skin," a person gradually attains spiritual perfection by experiencing both good and evil and learning from her experiences. According to Sri Ramakrishna, God created the world as a spiritual gymnasium in which we have to practice "hard spiritual discipline" in order to overcome our evil tendencies and finally attain liberation (*K* 437 / *G* 436). Sri Ramakrishna parts ways with Rāmānuja on this issue. Rāmānuja, we should recall from section I, claims that God could not possibly have created this world with the motive of benefiting His creatures, since this world is so full of suffering. In stark contrast to Rāmānuja, Sri Ramakrishna maintains that God has included evil and suffering in Her world-*līlā*



precisely *in order to* benefit Her creatures spiritually. From Sri Ramakrishna's perspective, we would not have been able to develop spiritually if this world were devoid of evil. Unlike Rāmānuja, then, Sri Ramakrishna does not take God's motive of sportive play to be incompatible with Her motive of benefiting Her creatures.

In these passages, Sri Ramakrishna hints at what I call a "saint-making" theodicy, which he elaborates more fully in other places in the *Kathāmṛta*. Sri Ramakrishna's most detailed account of his saint-making theodicy is contained in the following dialogue with his neighbor, which deserves to be quoted at length:

A NEIGHBOR: "Why does a man have sinful tendencies [*pāpabuddhi*]?"

SRI RAMAKRISHNA: "In God's creation there are all sorts of things. She has created bad men as well as good men. It is She who gives us good tendencies, and it is She again who gives us evil tendencies."

NEIGHBOR: "In that case we aren't responsible for our sinful actions, are we?"

SRI RAMAKRISHNA: "God has ordained that if one commits sin, one has to reap the fruits of that sin. Won't you burn your tongue if you chew a chilli? In his youth Mathur led a rather fast life; so he suffered from various diseases before his death. . . ."

NEIGHBOR: "Why has God created wicked people?"

SRI RAMAKRISHNA: "That is Her will, Her play [*tāhār icchā, tāhār līlā*]. In Her *māyā* there exists *avidyā* as well as *vidyā*. Darkness is needed too. It reveals all the more the glory of light. There is no doubt that anger, lust, and greed are evils. Why, then, has God created them? In order to create saints [*mahat lok toyer korben bole*]. One becomes a saint by conquering the senses. Is there anything impossible for one who has subdued his passions? He can even realize God, through Her grace. Again, see how Her whole play of creation is perpetuated through lust."

"Wicked people are needed too. . . . God has created all kinds of things. She has created good trees, and poisonous plants and weeds as well. Among the animals there are good, bad, and all kinds of creatures—tigers, lions, snakes, and so on."

...

NEIGHBOR: "Then householders, too, will have the vision of God, won't they?"

SRI RAMAKRISHNA: "Everybody will surely be liberated. But one should follow the instructions of the guru; if one follows a devious path, one will suffer in trying to retrace one's steps. It takes a long time to achieve liberation. A man may fail to obtain it in this life. Perhaps he will realize God only after many births." (*K* 36–37 / *G* 97–98)

Sri Ramakrishna's response to his neighbor's question, "Why has God created wicked people?" encompasses both the first and second dimensions of his

theodicy. Sri Ramakrishna begins by asserting that God has chosen to include wicked people in Her *līlā*, but he then immediately goes on to explain *why* God's *līlā* contains so much evil: God has created wicked people "[i]n order to create saints." Just as a game is played with certain fixed rules, God's world-*līlā* has, as it were, certain rules built into it, which have profound theodical implications. In particular, since God has created this world as an environment for saint-making, evil is as necessary as good. As Sri Ramakrishna puts it, darkness "reveals all the more the glory of light." In other words, it is through the experience of good and evil, both in the world and in ourselves, that we gradually learn to combat our own evil tendencies—such as "anger, lust, and greed"—and to cultivate ethical and spiritual virtues that are necessary to realize God. Good and saintly people serve as role models who inspire us to emulate them by exercising self-control and engaging in ethical behavior and spiritual practice. On the other hand, the evil we encounter in the world serves as a kind of mirror that reflects the evil tendencies lurking within our own hearts. The evil and unethical actions of others lead us to recognize the horrific consequences of evil and motivate us to try to eliminate our own selfish and evil tendencies. In a world without evil, this "game" of saint-making would not even get off the ground, since everyone would be saintly from the outset and, hence, there would be no evil tendencies to overcome.

It is worth pursuing this game analogy a bit further. Since we are all participants in God's "game" of saint-making, we all have to abide by the rules of the game. In the passage cited above, Sri Ramakrishna mentions three "rules" in particular—the law of *karma*, the doctrine of rebirth, and the doctrine of universal salvation—each of which plays an important role in his saint-making theodicy.<sup>33</sup> After Sri Ramakrishna remarks that God has given people both good and evil tendencies, his neighbor asks, "In that case we aren't responsible for our sinful actions, are we?" Sri Ramakrishna's neighbor reasons that if God has given us evil tendencies, then the moral responsibility for evil lies with God rather than with us. In response to his neighbor's doubt, Sri Ramakrishna appeals to the law of *karma*: "God has ordained that if one commits sin, one has to reap the fruits of that sin. Won't you burn your tongue if you chew a chilli?" If God were to give us good or evil tendencies or place us in fortunate or unfortunate circumstances arbitrarily or whimsically, then God *would* seem to be morally responsible for evil. However, like Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja, Sri Ramakrishna maintains that God generally acts in accordance with the law of *karma*. That is, God gives us what we

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33. Chatterjee also acknowledges the importance of the law of *karma* in Sri Ramakrishna's theodicy (*Classical Indian Philosophies*, 128–29). Unlike Chatterjee, however, I argue that Sri Ramakrishna embeds the doctrine of *karma* in a broader saint-making theodicy.

deserve. Sri Ramakrishna would agree with Śaṅkara, therefore, that God is akin to the rainfall that causes the growth of paddy, barley, and other crops but is not responsible for the differences among these various crops. Similarly, while God does endow us with good or evil tendencies and places us in favorable or unfavorable circumstances, She does so in accordance with our own *karma*—the merit or demerit we have accrued through our own past behavior and action.

Sri Ramakrishna also follows Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja in taking the law of *karma* to go hand in hand with the doctrine of rebirth. Sri Ramakrishna refers in passing to rebirth at the end of the passage cited above, where he remarks that if a person does not attain liberation in this life, he may still attain liberation “after many births.” Indeed, Sri Ramakrishna not only affirms the doctrine of rebirth but also explicitly links it to the law of *karma*, as in the following remark: “There is such a thing as inborn tendencies [*saṃskāra*]. When a man has performed many good actions in his previous births, in the final birth he becomes guileless” (*K* 840 / *G* 783). In accordance with traditional Hindu doctrine, Sri Ramakrishna maintains that the actions one performs in this life will certainly bear fruit, if not in this birth then in a future birth.

Sri Ramakrishna’s appeal to the doctrines of *karma* and rebirth has two important theodical implications. First, the law of *karma* shifts moral responsibility for evil from God to Her creatures: we are responsible for bringing evil into the world through our own evil thoughts and actions. Second, the doctrines of *karma* and rebirth jointly explain, in principle, all instances of evil and suffering in the world. Recent Western philosophers have often emphasized instances of “gratuitous,” “pointless,” or “dysteleological” evil—that is, instances of evil, such as the Nazi Holocaust, that cannot be explained or justified in terms of any known theodicy. As Herman points out, however, on the assumption of the Indian theory of *karma*, there is no strictly gratuitous evil, since all cases of evil can be explained as the *karmic* consequences of one’s past deeds, either in this life or in a previous life.<sup>34</sup>

Michael Stoeber makes a helpful distinction between “retributive” and “teleological” theories of *karma*, which clarifies the precise role of the law of *karma* in Sri Ramakrishna’s saint-making theodicy.<sup>35</sup> According to the retributive theory of *karma*, whatever suffering we undergo is retribution for our past evil deeds. Stoeber argues that Śaṅkara’s *karma*-based theodicy presupposes such a retributive conception of *karma*.<sup>36</sup> By contrast, the teleological theory of *karma*, while

34. Herman, *The Problem of Evil and Indian Thought*, 287–89.

35. Michael Stoeber, *Evil and the Mystics’ God: Towards a Mystical Theodicy* (London: Macmillan, 1992), 172–87.

36. Stoeber, *Evil and the Mystics’ God*, 179.

accepting retribution as a key aspect of the workings of *karma*, nonetheless subordinates retribution to teleology. On this view, as Stoeber puts it, the twin doctrines of *karma* and rebirth are a “vehicle of moral education rather than that of a mechanical punishing device.”<sup>37</sup> Stoeber rightly refers to Sri Aurobindo as one of the foremost champions of this teleological approach to *karma*, citing the following passage from his *The Problem of Rebirth* (1921):

And what of suffering and happiness, misfortune and prosperity? These are experiences of the soul in its training, helps, props, means, disciplines, tests, ordeals,—and prosperity often a worse ordeal than suffering. Indeed, adversity, suffering may often be regarded rather as a reward to virtue than as a punishment for sin, since it turns out to be the greatest help and purifier of the soul struggling to unfold itself. To regard it merely as the stern award of a Judge, the anger of an irritated Ruler or even the mechanical recoil of result of evil upon cause of evil is to take the most superficial view possible of God's dealings with the soul and the law of the world's evolution.<sup>38</sup>

As Sri Aurobindo points out, a strictly retributive theory of *karma* is highly questionable from the standpoint of theodicy, since it makes God out to be a stern “Judge” or an “irritated Ruler.” While suffering may very well be the result of past misdeeds, the experience of suffering—by testing, challenging, and purifying the soul—nonetheless plays an indispensable teleological role in the soul's spiritual journey toward God.

I would suggest that Sri Ramakrishna was an important forerunner to Sri Aurobindo in adopting a teleological, rather than a more narrowly retributive, view of *karma*. Indeed, since Sri Aurobindo was strongly influenced by Sri Ramakrishna and carefully read the *Kathāmṛta*, Sri Aurobindo's views on *karma* and rebirth were likely shaped, in part, by Sri Ramakrishna's teachings on these matters. Anticipating Sri Aurobindo, Sri Ramakrishna embeds the doctrines of *karma* and rebirth in a broader saint-making teleological framework. Therefore, for Sri Ramakrishna, suffering and evil play a positive teleological role in the saint-making process by motivating us to overcome our egoistic and evil tendencies and to try to come closer to God.

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37. Stoeber, *Evil and the Mystics' God*, 180.

38. Cited in Stoeber, *Evil and the Mystics' God*, 180. For the original passage, see *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, vol. 13: *Essays in Philosophy and Yoga: Shorter Works, 1910–1950* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, 1998), 267–68.

Some Western scholars have argued that the Indian doctrine of *karma* provides the sole basis for a successful theodicy. As early as 1916, Weber effused that the “*Karma* doctrine . . . represents the most consistent theodicy ever produced by history.”<sup>39</sup> Similarly, Herman, in his provocative and groundbreaking book *The Problem of Evil and Indian Thought* (1971), argues that all Western theodicies have failed and that the Indian “doctrine of rebirth” alone “solves the problem of evil.”<sup>40</sup> By contrast, Whitley Kaufman claims that “the doctrine of karma and rebirth, taken as a systematic rational account of human suffering by which all individual suffering is explained as a result of that individual’s wrongdoing, is unsuccessful as a theodicy.”<sup>41</sup>

Scholars on both sides of this debate have tended to assume that the doctrines of *karma* and rebirth comprise a complete, stand-alone theodicy. However, as Monima Chadha and Nick Trakakis have pointed out, “the karma theory is not usually put forward by its proponents as a complete and systematic explanation of human suffering.”<sup>42</sup> Sri Ramakrishna, as well as Sri Aurobindo after him, can be seen as straddling both sides of this debate about the theodical implications of the *karma* doctrine. On the one hand, Sri Ramakrishna would agree with Herman and Weber that the law of *karma* has significant theodical force, since it shifts, to a certain extent, the moral responsibility for evil from God to God’s creatures. On the other hand, Sri Ramakrishna would likely agree with Kaufman that the *karma* doctrine fails as a stand-alone theodicy. Accordingly, Sri Ramakrishna inscribes the doctrines of *karma* and rebirth within a broader saint-making theodicy that provides a teleological account of the ultimate spiritual purpose and significance of evil and suffering.

There is a subtle difference between Sri Ramakrishna’s and Śaṅkara’s respective theodical appeals to the doctrine of *karma*. As we have seen in section I, Śaṅkara’s theodicy arguably restricts God’s omnipotence by making God entirely dependent on the law of *karma*. In contrast to Śaṅkara, Sri Ramakrishna points

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39. Weber, *The Religion of India*, 121. Weber makes a similar remark in the *Sociology of Religion*: “The most complete formal solution of the problem of theodicy is the special achievement of the Indian doctrine of karma, the so-called belief in the transmigration of souls.” *Sociology of Religion*, trans. Ephraim Fischhoff (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), 145.

40. Herman, *The Problem of Evil and Indian Thought*, 287.

41. Whitley Kaufman, “Karma, Rebirth, and the Problem of Evil,” *Philosophy East and West* 55.1 (January 2005), 28. For a similar critique of *karma*-based theodicy, see Matilal’s “A Note on Śaṅkara’s Theodicy.”

42. Monima Chadha and Nick Trakakis, “Karma and the Problem of Evil: A Response to Kaufman,” *Philosophy East and West* 57.4 (October 2007), 534. For a similar argument, see Perrett, “Karma and the Problem of Suffering,” 9 and Reichenbach, *The Law of Karma*, 77.

out that God created the law of *karma*, so She can also violate or suspend the law of *karma* whenever She chooses:

PAŚUPATI (SMILING): "Well, things will go on as long as She keeps them going."

SRI RAMAKRISHNA: "That is true. But one should think of God. It is not good to forget Her."

NANDA: "But how little we think of God!"

SRI RAMAKRISHNA: "One thinks of God through Her grace [*tāhār kṛpā*]."

NANDA: "But how can we obtain God's grace? Has She really the power to bestow grace?"

SRI RAMAKRISHNA (SMILING): "I see. You think as the intellectuals do: one reaps the results of one's actions. Give up these ideas. The effect of *karma* wears away if one takes refuge in God [*īśvarer śaraṇāgata hole karma kṣay hoy*]. . . ."

NANDA: "Can God violate law [*āin tini chāḍāte pāren*]?"

SRI RAMAKRISHNA: "What do you mean? She is the Lord. She can do everything. She who has made the law can also change it [*jini āin korechen, tini āin badlāte pāren*]." (K 877–78 / G 817)

In response to Sri Ramakrishna's appeal to God's grace, Nanda questions whether God really has "the power to bestow grace." Sri Ramakrishna immediately recognizes the philosophical dilemma behind Nanda's query: if God always acts in accordance with the law of *karma*, then there is no scope for God to bestow grace on His creatures, since any such bestowal of grace would violate the law of *karma*. Somewhat startlingly, Sri Ramakrishna tells Nanda to "[g]ive up" the idea that "one reaps the results of one's actions" and to accept instead the fact that the "effect of *karma* wears away if one takes refuge in God." It would be a mistake to interpret this statement as an outright rejection of the law of *karma*. Rather, Sri Ramakrishna accepts the general validity of the law of *karma* but insists that the *karmic* consequences of one's past actions can nonetheless be mitigated or even nullified through God's grace. Since God created the law of *karma* as one of the "rules" of Her *līlā*—the cosmic "game" She has chosen to play—She can also break the "rule" of *karma* whenever She chooses.<sup>43</sup>

Another key feature of Sri Ramakrishna's saint-making theodicy is the doctrine of universal salvation. In the long passage cited earlier, Sri Ramakrishna remarks that "[e]verybody will surely be liberated" sooner or later, either in this birth or

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43. On this issue, I disagree with Long, who claims that Sri Ramakrishna conceives "Ishvara" along the lines of the "process God," who "cannot interfere with our choices and is even limited by the constraints of karma" ("Like a Dog's Curly Tail," 123). In my view, it is Śaṅkara, rather than Sri Ramakrishna, who thinks that *īśvara* is entirely constrained by the law of *karma*.

in a future birth (*K* 37 / *G* 98). Indeed, he repeatedly affirms the doctrine of universal salvation, frequently in the context of theodicy. For instance, in response to Nanda's doubts about God's goodness in the face of evil, Sri Ramakrishna states: "All will surely realize God. All will be liberated. It may be that some get their meal in the morning, some at noon, and some in the evening; but none will go without food. All, without any exception, will certainly know their real Self" (*K* 879 / *G* 818). If some people are ultimately deprived of spiritual salvation, then God could still be accused of partiality and cruelty. However, a striking feature of God's "game" of saint-making is that everybody wins eventually. The doctrine of universal salvation, therefore, plays a crucial role in Sri Ramakrishna's theodicy: the infinite good of spiritual salvation that awaits *all* of us outweighs the various finite evils of this life. In fact, as we will see in section III of the next chapter, some recent philosophers such as John Hick have argued that any theodicy that does not accept universal salvation is doomed to fail.

In sum, Sri Ramakrishna's saint-making theodicy has a number of unique features that mitigate the severity of the problem of evil. First, he makes a strong case for the necessity of evil in a saint-making environment meant to foster our ethical and spiritual development. Second, God's *līlā* is governed by the law of *karma*, which—at least to a certain extent—shifts the moral responsibility for evil from God to God's creatures. Indeed, as Weber and Herman have argued, Indian theodicies have a decisive advantage over Judeo-Christian theodicies precisely because the former are based on the doctrines of *karma* and rebirth. Third, Sri Ramakrishna's doctrine of universal salvation further defuses the problem of evil, since the various finite evils afflicting God's creatures are outweighed by the eternal salvation God has in store for us all, either in this birth or in a future birth.

#### IV. Reconciling Sri Ramakrishna's Saint-Making Theodicy with His Hard Theological Determinism

An important objection may be raised at this point.<sup>44</sup> Sri Ramakrishna's saint-making theodicy seems to presuppose the reality of free will, for at least two reasons. First, if God determines all our actions, then God—rather than human beings—would be ultimately responsible for all the evil that humans commit, in spite of the law of *karma*. Second, the entire process of saint-making presupposes that people take moral responsibility for their behavior. For instance, when I commit an evil act, it is precisely because I feel morally responsible for my action

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44. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting that I address Sri Ramakrishna's views on free will in the context of his theodicy.



that I subsequently feel pangs of conscience and remorse, which then motivate me to avoid engaging in evil acts in the future. Moral responsibility, in turn, seems to require free will, since it is intuitively plausible to believe that we are morally responsible only for those actions that we had the freedom *not* to have performed. However, as we will see shortly, Sri Ramakrishna *denies* the reality of free will and thereby seems to preclude the very possibility of moral responsibility. Therefore, Sri Ramakrishna's denial of free will arguably undermines his own saint-making theodicy.

A full response to this objection requires a detailed reconstruction and analysis of Sri Ramakrishna's complex views on free will and determinism, which I have provided in a separate article.<sup>45</sup> For present purposes, I will summarize briefly Sri Ramakrishna's views on this issue, and then explain how they are compatible with his saint-making theodicy.<sup>46</sup> He clarifies his stance on free will in the following passage:

It is God alone who does everything. You may say that in that case man may commit sin. But that is not true. If a man is firmly convinced that God alone is the Doer and that he himself is nothing, then he will never make a false step.

It is God alone who has planted in man's mind what the "Englishmen" call free will [*svādhīn icchā*]. People who have not realized God would become engaged in more and more sinful actions if God had not planted in them the notion of free will. Sin would have increased if God had not made the sinner feel that he alone was responsible for his sin.

Those who have realized God are aware that free will is a false appearance [*jārā tāke lābh koreche, tārā jāne dekhete "svādhīn icchā"*]. In reality man is the machine and God its Operator [*vastutaḥ tinī yantrī, āmi yantra*], man is the carriage and God its Driver. (*K* 376 / *G* 379–80)

Sri Ramakrishna makes absolutely clear that he is a theological determinist: "It is God alone who does everything." More specifically, he is a *hard* theological determinist, since he maintains that theological determinism is incompatible with

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45. Ayon Maharaj, "Hard Theological Determinism and the Illusion of Free Will: Sri Ramakrishna Meets Lord Kames, Saul Smilansky, and Derk Pereboom," *Journal of World Philosophies* (forthcoming in December 2018). This article provides a detailed reconstruction of Sri Ramakrishna's views on free will and determinism and brings him into conversation with Western philosophers.

46. For a brief but helpful discussion of Sri Ramakrishna's views on free will and determinism, see Arindam Chakrabarti, "The Dark Mother Flying Kites: Sri Ramakrishna's Metaphysics of Morals," *Sophia* 33.3 (1994), 21–26.

free will.<sup>47</sup> Free will, according to Sri Ramakrishna, is actually a “false appearance.” Indeed, the fact that Sri Ramakrishna ascribes the doctrine of free will to “Englishmen” suggests that he takes the very notion of free will to be a Western import that is foreign to the Hindu sensibility.<sup>48</sup>

For Sri Ramakrishna, hard theological determinism was not an intellectual hypothesis arrived at through reasoning but a deep conviction rooted in his own mystical experience of God as the Doer. As he puts it, “There is Someone within me who does all these things through me. . . . I am the machine and God is the Operator. I act as She makes me act. I speak as She makes me speak” (*K* 132 / *G* 176). Indeed, he would frequently teach that only the *jīvanmukta*, one who has achieved liberation while living, realizes that God alone is the Doer: “A man becomes a *jīvanmukta* when he knows that God is the Doer of all things. . . . Where is man’s free will? All are under the Will of God” (*K* 126 / *G* 159).

However, Sri Ramakrishna was also aware that such a mystical justification of theological determinism is unlikely to convince those with a more rational or skeptical temperament. Therefore, he also provided a rational argument for the nonexistence of free will on the basis of the law of psychophysical causation (*K* 966 / *G* 892). Since I discuss Sri Ramakrishna’s rational argument in detail in my article, I will only summarize the argument here.<sup>49</sup> According to Sri Ramakrishna, belief and desire are the motivating forces behind all our actions. We engage in a particular action only when we believe that there is something desirable to be gained from so acting. Further, Sri Ramakrishna holds that our desires were not ultimately *chosen* by us. Therefore, even though we usually think we act freely, our actions are, in fact, completely determined by desires which we did not freely choose to have. As a hard theological determinist, Sri Ramakrishna maintains that God is the ultimate causal source of all our beliefs and desires.

Sri Ramakrishna also anticipates a natural objection to his hard theological determinist position: a person who feels that God does everything could engage in sinful actions and justify them by saying that it is God who *makes* him sin. Sri Ramakrishna raises and responds to this objection in the following passage:

It is God alone who does everything. You may say that in that case people may commit sin. But that is not true. If one truly realizes, “God alone is

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47. For a helpful discussion of soft and hard forms of theological determinism, see section 3 of Leigh Vicens, “Theological Determinism,” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (<http://www.iep.utm.edu>) (accessed 9 January 2018). For a detailed defense of my interpretation of Sri Ramakrishna as a hard theological determinist, see Maharaj, “Hard Theological Determinism and the Illusion of Free Will.”

48. Sri Ramakrishna adopts a hard theological determinist stance at numerous other places in the *Kathāmṛta*, including *K* 175 / *G* 211.

49. See section I of Maharaj, “Hard Theological Determinism and the Illusion of Free Will.”

the Doer, and I am the non-doer," then he will never make a false step. (*K* 376 / *G* 379–80)

According to Sri Ramakrishna, only people who have realized God internalize fully the truth of hard theological determinism, and these *jīvanmuktas* are incapable of committing sin, since they are conscious instruments of God. Therefore, although the *jīvanmukta* knows that he has no free will or moral responsibility, he "will never make a false step."

One might argue, however, that Sri Ramakrishna's response to this objection is inadequate as it stands. After all, even if enlightened *jīvanmuktas* are incapable of committing sin, ordinary unenlightened people can still engage in sinful actions and readily excuse themselves by claiming that God causes them to sin.<sup>50</sup> Sri Ramakrishna's response to this objection is contained in the passage cited earlier in this section: "It is God alone who has planted in man's mind what the 'Englishmen' call free will. . . . Sin would have increased if God had not made the sinner feel that he alone was responsible for his sin" (*K* 376 / *G* 379–80). This is perhaps the most strikingly original feature of Sri Ramakrishna's position on free will and determinism. According to Sri Ramakrishna, God Himself, in His infinite wisdom, has endowed ordinary unenlightened people with the *illusion* of free will; otherwise, they would have engaged in "more and more sinful actions." He also explains why the widespread belief in theological determinism among ordinary people would have had such morally disastrous consequences. The sense of free will, Sri Ramakrishna points out, is a necessary condition for the feeling of moral responsibility. Therefore, if ordinary people did not feel that they were free, they would not have taken moral responsibility for their actions—which would have resulted in a massive increase in immoral behavior.

Sri Ramakrishna's crucial distinction between the standpoint of the ignorant person and the standpoint of the enlightened saint holds the key to understanding how his denial of free will is compatible with his saint-making theodicy. According to Sri Ramakrishna, those who have not yet realized God *believe* that they are free and, therefore, feel morally responsible for their actions, and this *feeling* of moral responsibility is all that is necessary for the saint-making process to be meaningful. For Sri Ramakrishna, then, the moral responsibility felt by ordinary people who have not yet realized God depends not on the reality of free will but on the *feeling* of free will.

On the other hand, God-realized saints know that God alone has been the Doer all along, but this realization in no way diminishes the value of the

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50. For an in-depth discussion of Sri Ramakrishna's response to this objection, see section I of Maharaj, "Hard Theological Determinism and the Illusion of Free Will."

saint-making journey they had undergone. While these saints no longer take moral responsibility for their actions, they are incapable of committing any evil action—as Sri Ramakrishna puts it, they “cannot take a false step”—because they are conscious instruments of God. From Sri Ramakrishna’s perspective, so long as we take care to distinguish the standpoint of ignorant people from the standpoint of enlightened saints, we will not find any conflict between hard theological determinism and the sense of moral responsibility required for his saint-making theodicy.<sup>51</sup> Recently, Derk Pereboom and Trakakis have defended the compatibility of hard theological determinism with soul-making theodicies.<sup>52</sup> As Pereboom argues, “the development from cowardice to courage, from immorality to morality, from ignorance to enlightenment, is valuable, even if these processes are wholly causally determined by God.”<sup>53</sup> Arguments such as this support Sri Ramakrishna’s position that a saint-making theodicy is compatible with hard theological determinism.

## V. Sri Ramakrishna’s Theodical Endgame: The Panentheistic Standpoint of *Vijñāna*

On numerous occasions, when religious believers such as Nanda and Hari raised the problem of evil, Sri Ramakrishna appealed ultimately to the mystical standpoint of *vijñāna*. In section III, for instance, I quoted the beginning of a dialogue in which Nanda asks Sri Ramakrishna whether God can sometimes suspend the law of *karma* and Sri Ramakrishna responds in the affirmative. In the continuation of this dialogue, Nanda raises two serious objections to Sri Ramakrishna’s

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51. In section I of “Hard Theological Determinism and the Illusion of Free Will,” I address an important objection to Sri Ramakrishna’s view: what happens if the standpoints of the enlightened saint and the ignorant person collide? For instance, what if a God-realized saint were to tell an ignorant person that free will is an illusion and that God alone determines everything we do? Could this lead the ignorant person to abandon his belief in free will? And if it did, wouldn’t the ignorant person’s premature belief in theological determinism have disastrous consequences? In the article, I defend Sri Ramakrishna against this objection by arguing that Sri Ramakrishna would reject what contemporary epistemologists call “doxastic voluntarism”—the view that we can adopt beliefs at will—with respect to beliefs about God’s existence and theological determinism. According to Sri Ramakrishna, even if an enlightened saint *tells* an ignorant person that God is the Doer, the ignorant person cannot truly *believe* that God is the Doer until and unless he realizes God himself.

52. Derk Pereboom, “Libertarianism and Theological Determinism,” in *Free Will and Theism: Connections, Contingencies, and Concerns*, ed. Kevin Timpe and Daniel Speak (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 112–31, esp. 124–27; Nick Trakakis, “Does Hard Determinism Render the Problem of Evil Even Harder?,” *Ars Disputandi* 6 (2006), 239–64, esp. 247–49.

53. Pereboom, “Libertarianism and Theological Determinism,” 125.

theodicy that lead Sri Ramakrishna to appeal to the panentheistic standpoint of *vijñāna*:

NANDA: "But is God partial? [*īśvar ki pakṣapātī?*] If things happen through God's grace, then I must say God is partial."

SRI RAMAKRISHNA: "But God Herself has become everything—the universe and its living beings. You will realize it when you have Perfect Knowledge [*pūrṇa jñāna*]. God Herself has become the twenty-four cosmic principles: the mind, intellect, body, and so forth. Is there anyone but Herself to whom She can show partiality? [*tini āṛ pakṣapāt kār upar korben?*]"

NANDA: "Why has God assumed all these different forms? Why are some wise and some ignorant?"

SRI RAMAKRISHNA: "It is God's sweet will [*tār khuśī*]. . . . The Divine Mother is full of bliss and a spirit of playfulness [*tini ānandamayī*]. She is blissfully engaged in the sportive play [*līlā*] of creation, preservation, and destruction. Innumerable are the living beings. Only one or two among them obtain liberation. And that makes Her happy. . . ."

NANDA: "It may be Her sweet will; but it is death to us!" [*tāhār khuśī! āmrā je mori!*]

SRI RAMAKRISHNA: "But who are you? It is the Divine Mother who has become all this [*tomrā kothāi? tini sab hoyechen*]. It is only as long as you do not know Her that you say, 'I, 'I'."

All will surely realize God. All will be liberated. It may be that some get their meal in the morning, some at noon, and some in the evening; but none will go without food. All, without any exception, will certainly know their real Self." (K 878 / G 818)

Nanda's first objection to Sri Ramakrishna's theodicy can be clarified in terms of the dilemma facing *karma*-based theodicies discussed in section I. While Śaṅkara curtails God's omnipotence by emphasizing God's absolute dependence on the law of *karma*, Sri Ramakrishna adopts the view that God can suspend or mitigate the *karmic* consequences of the actions of certain people through Her grace. As Nanda recognizes, however, Sri Ramakrishna's accommodation of God's grace saves God's omnipotence at the cost of reintroducing the problem of evil: isn't God "partial" if She chooses to suspend or mitigate the *karmic* consequences of the actions of certain people and not others, and only on certain occasions? So long as the law of *karma* is incontrovertible and universally applicable, the moral responsibility for evil and suffering can be said to lie with God's creatures rather than with God. However, if God can sometimes violate or override the law of *karma*, then the moral responsibility for evil gets shifted back onto God's shoulders.

Tellingly, Sri Ramakrishna responds to Nanda's charge of divine partiality by appealing to the panentheistic standpoint of *vijñāna*: God Herself has become everything and everyone in the universe, so there is no one besides God to whom God can be partial.<sup>54</sup> As he puts it, "Is there anyone but Herself to whom She can show partiality?" From the mystical standpoint of *vijñāna*, Sri Ramakrishna does not so much solve as *dissolve* the problem of evil. A *vijñānī* such as Sri Ramakrishna realizes that both evildoers and victims of evil are different guises playfully assumed by God Herself in the course of Her cosmic *līlā*. Since God has *become* Her creatures, the traditional problem of evil—which presupposes a distinction between God and Her suffering creatures—disappears.

Nanda, who remains troubled by the problem of evil, proceeds to raise an even more fundamental objection to Sri Ramakrishna's theodicy: God's *līlā* is "death to us." In other words, why didn't God create a better *līlā* with little or no suffering? Why did God choose to play *this* particular cosmic "game"—involving the law of *karma* and the telos of saint-making—which entails so much suffering for Her creatures? Nanda's objection to Sri Ramakrishna should remind us of Herman's objection to Rāmānuja's *līlā*-based theodicy, which was already quoted in section I: "When Brahman, through *līlā*, expressed His joy, why didn't He do it better?"<sup>55</sup> While Rāmānuja fails to provide a satisfactory answer to this question, Sri Ramakrishna justifies God's *līlā* by appealing once again to the panentheistic standpoint of *vijñāna*: "But who are you? It is the Divine Mother who has become all this."<sup>56</sup> Nanda's objection that God's *līlā* is "death to us" clearly presupposes a difference between God and Her creatures. Sri Ramakrishna refutes Nanda's objection by denying precisely this presupposition. As a *vijñānī*, Sri Ramakrishna affirms that God Herself sports in the form of the various *jīvas*, so all the suffering endured by *jīvas* is actually God's own playfully *self-inflicted* "suffering." He makes this clear in the continuation of his dialogue with Hari cited in section III, in which Hari raises an objection to Sri Ramakrishna's theodicy that echoes Nanda's objection almost verbatim:

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54. The term "panentheism" has been used by philosophers in a variety of senses, so my use of the term requires some clarification. All panentheists agree that God is immanent as well as transcendent, but they differ on how they understand God's immanence in the world. Sri Ramakrishna, I maintain, was a panentheist in a very strong sense. While some panentheists claim that God is *in* all things, Sri Ramakrishna goes even further by affirming that God *is* all things and beings in the universe. For Sri Ramakrishna, God alone exists, so everything in this universe is an actual manifestation of God. For a detailed elaboration of Sri Ramakrishna's panentheistic metaphysics, see section III of chapter 1.

55. Herman, *The Problem of Evil and Indian Thought*, 270.

56. Interestingly, even though Rāmānuja champions the panentheistic philosophy of Viśiṣṭādvaita, panentheism plays no role in his theodicy.

HARI: “But this play of God is our death [*khelāi je āmāder prāṇ jāi*].”

SRI RAMAKRISHNA (SMILING): “Please tell me who you are. God alone has become all this—*māyā*, *jīvas*, the universe, and the twenty-four cosmic principles. ‘As the snake I bite, and as the charmer I cure.’ It is God Herself who has become both *vidyā* [knowledge] and *avidyā* [ignorance]. She remains deluded by *avidyā-māyā*. Again, with the help of the guru, She is cured by *vidyā-māyā*.

Ignorance, Knowledge, and Intimate Knowledge [*ajñāna*, *jñāna*, *viññāna*]. The *jñānī* sees that God alone exists and is the Doer, that She creates, preserves, and destroys. The *viññānī* sees that it is God who has become all this.” (K 437 / G 436)

Sri Ramakrishna's ultimate theodical justification of God's *līlā* is based on an appeal to the panentheistic experience of *viññāna*. God Herself, in the form of ignorant *jīvas*, undergoes suffering and delusion through “*avidyā-māyā*,” and God Herself, in the form of spiritually inclined *jīvas*, practices spiritual disciplines with the help of “*vidyā-māyā*,” thereby transcending suffering and achieving spiritual liberation. From Sri Ramakrishna's standpoint, the problem of evil is only a problem for those who mistakenly think that they are different from God.

A striking incident in Sri Ramakrishna's life nicely captures the theodical significance of *viññāna*:

One day the Master [Sri Ramakrishna] saw a butterfly flying towards him with a tiny stick in its tail. At first he was pained by the thought that some naughty boy had done this. But in the next moment he said in ecstasy, “O Rāma, you have created your own distress!” and then burst into laughter. (LP I.ii.177–78 / DP 320)

Sri Ramakrishna was confronted with an apparent case of moral evil in which a butterfly was suffering likely because a mischievous boy cruelly lodged a stick in its tail. Initially pained at the sight, Sri Ramakrishna suddenly ascended to the ecstatic mystical standpoint of *viññāna*: God Himself, he realized, was sporting playfully in the form of both the wounded butterfly and the naughty boy who harmed the butterfly. From the panentheistic standpoint of *viññāna*, then, the problem of evil does not even arise, since all the suffering creatures in God's world-*līlā* are actually disguised forms of God Himself.

At this point, however, one might reasonably ask: what good is Sri Ramakrishna's theodical appeal to the panentheistic state of *viññāna* if this rarefied mystical experience is not available to Nanda, Hari, or indeed, to the vast majority of ordinary mortals? So long as we *feel* that we are suffering creatures



who are different from God, we also feel the urgency of the problem of evil. The key to understanding how Sri Ramakrishna would respond to this query is to recall the distinction between the two different kinds of people Sri Ramakrishna addresses: religious believers and religious skeptics. When a religious skeptic such as Vidyāsāgar presents an argument from evil against God's existence, Sri Ramakrishna refutes the argument on two fronts. First, he makes the skeptical theist argument that in light of human cognitive limitations, proponents of evidential arguments from evil are not justified in inferring from *their* inability to think of a morally sufficient reason for God to have permitted a particular evil to the conclusion that God *had* no morally sufficient reason for permitting that evil. Second, Sri Ramakrishna argues that they also cannot rule out the possibility of a saint-making theodicy, which *does* explain why God permits all the evil we see in the world.

As we have seen, however, Sri Ramakrishna recognizes that his saint-making theodicy still leaves certain questions unanswered. In particular, it invites two serious objections, which have already been touched upon in this section. First, isn't God guilty of partiality if She bestows Her grace only on some of Her creatures by mitigating the *karmic* consequences of their actions? Second, why didn't God create a better *lilā* with little or no suffering? From Sri Ramakrishna's standpoint, these objections can only be satisfactorily refuted—or, better, dissolved—from the mystical standpoint of *vijñāna*. Both objections presuppose a difference between God and Her suffering creatures. However, on the basis of his experience of *vijñāna*, Sri Ramakrishna denies this very presupposition by affirming that God has become everything in the universe. Crucially, for the purpose of refuting arguments from evil against God's existence, Sri Ramakrishna need only establish the *possibility*, rather than the *truth*, of his unique theodicy, which combines a saint-making teleological framework with the pantheistic metaphysics of *vijñāna*.

By contrast, Sri Ramakrishna appeals to the full-blown *truth* of his theodicy when conversing with religiously inclined people such as Nanda and Hari, who do not so much doubt God's existence as seek to strengthen their faith in God by understanding why a loving God permits so much evil. Sri Ramakrishna attempts to fortify the religious faith of such people by explaining that God permits evil in the world "in order to create saints." Ultimately, however, Sri Ramakrishna appeals to the pantheistic standpoint of *vijñāna* in order to resolve, once and for all, any of their lingering doubts. As a *vijñānī*, Sri Ramakrishna assures them that in reality there is nothing but God and that God Herself sports in the form of both evildoers and the victims of evil. For religious believers engaged in the spiritual exercise of faith seeking understanding, Sri Ramakrishna's theodical appeal to pantheism may provide some measure of consolation and insight in spite of their inability to share his lofty mystical standpoint. Since believers such

as Nanda and Hari trust Sri Ramakrishna's words and his spiritual experiences, they can take solace in the fact that there is an ultimate metaphysical resolution of their remaining doubts about God's loving nature.

## VI. Anticipating Possible Objections

This chapter has provided a detailed reconstruction of Sri Ramakrishna's multidimensional response to the problem of evil. Of course, since each dimension of his response is controversial, a full-blown defense of his position is beyond the scope of this chapter. In lieu of such a comprehensive defense, I will conclude this chapter by addressing three potential objections to Sri Ramakrishna's views. The first objection targets his skeptical theism, while the second and third objections target aspects of his theodicy.

Contemporary philosophers such as Bruce Russell, Stephen Maitzen, and William Hasker argue that skeptical theism is untenable since it leads to moral paralysis.<sup>57</sup> They formulate this objection to skeptical theism in subtly different ways, but their basic objection runs as follows. Take the case of the twelve-year old Ashley Jones, who was brutally raped and murdered by an escapee from a juvenile detention center in 1997.<sup>58</sup> Our common-sense moral intuition tells us that if a human onlooker was present at the time and could have prevented Ashley's suffering without causing any harm to himself, then the onlooker should have felt morally obliged to prevent Ashley's suffering. However, if this hypothetical onlooker were a skeptical theist, he would believe that, for all he knows, God might have a morally sufficient reason to permit Ashley's suffering that lies beyond his ken. Therefore, the onlooker's skeptical theism would lead him to doubt whether he should intervene to prevent Ashley's suffering. Since such moral paralysis is repugnant to common-sense morality, skeptical theism must be false.

Skeptical theists have responded to the moral paralysis objection in a variety of ways.<sup>59</sup> I will focus here on Daniel Howard-Snyder's especially promising

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57. See Bruce Russell, "Defenseless," in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, ed. Howard-Snyder, 197–98; Stephen Maitzen, "Agnosticism, Skeptical Theism, and Moral Obligation," in *Skeptical Theism*, ed. Dougherty and McBrayer, 277–92; Stephen Law, "The Pandora's Box Objection to Skeptical Theism," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 78 (2015), 285–99; William Hasker, "All Too Skeptical Theism," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 68 (2010), 15–29.

58. Howard-Snyder mentions this example in "Epistemic Humility," 18.

59. For a good summary of five main strategies for responding to the moral paralysis objection to skeptical theism, see McBrayer, "Skeptical Theism," 618–20. See also Alexander R. Pruss's very recent defense of skeptical theism against the moral paralysis objection in his article "Sceptical Theism, the Butterfly Effect and Bracketing the Unknown," *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 81 (2017), 71–86.

response to the moral paralysis objection. Howard-Snyder readily agrees with his objectors that our common-sense moral intuition is correct: it is obviously true that an onlooker who could have prevented Ashley's suffering without causing harm to himself *should* have felt morally obligated to intervene in order to prevent her suffering. However, Howard-Snyder argues that the moral principle underlying this common-sense intuition does not, in fact, conflict with skeptical theism.<sup>60</sup> He formulates this underlying moral principle as follows:

One is obligated to prevent someone's undeserved suffering if and only if the total consequences for him [the sufferer] will be better if one intervenes than if one doesn't—unless one has a sufficiently good reason not to intervene and one permits it for that reason.<sup>61</sup>

According to Howard-Snyder, skeptical theism *would* conflict with common-sense morality if skeptical theism maintained that the onlooker should be in doubt about whether the foreseeable consequences of his intervening or not intervening reliably indicate "*the total consequences for Ashley*."<sup>62</sup> However, skeptical theism actually maintains that the onlooker should be in doubt about whether the foreseeable consequences of his intervening or not intervening reliably indicate "*the total consequences for everyone until the end of time*."<sup>63</sup> Therefore, common-sense morality is perfectly compatible with skeptical theism: the onlooker should have felt obligated to intervene to prevent Ashley's suffering, since he thought that the foreseeable consequences for Ashley reliably indicated the overall consequences for her and since he did not have "a sufficiently good reason" *not* to intervene.<sup>64</sup>

Howard-Snyder's line of reasoning helps us defend Sri Ramakrishna's particular brand of skeptical theism against the moral paralysis objection. From Sri Ramakrishna's perspective, God may very well have had a good reason to permit Ashley's suffering that lies partially or wholly beyond our ken. For instance, in light of the law of *karma*, her suffering might have been *karmic* expiation for the sins she committed in a previous life. Moreover, it is possible that her terrible suffering in *that* life could have been spiritually beneficial for her in the long run by contributing to her eternal soul's journey toward saintliness in *subsequent* lives.

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60. It should be noted that Howard-Snyder prefers the term "Agnosticism" to "skeptical theism."

61. Daniel Howard-Snyder, "Agnosticism, the Moral Skepticism Objection, and Commonsense Morality," in *Skeptical Theism*, ed. Dougherty and McBrayer, 304.

62. Howard-Snyder, "Agnosticism," 305.

63. Howard-Snyder, "Agnosticism," 305.

64. Howard-Snyder, "Agnosticism," 304.

Nonetheless, Sri Ramakrishna would maintain that our hypothetical onlooker would still have been morally obligated to try to prevent Ashley's suffering, since the onlooker believed that the overall consequences for Ashley *in that life* would have been better for her if he had intervened than if he had not intervened. Sri Ramakrishna's skeptical theism only recommends agnosticism about whether the foreseeable consequences of intervening or not intervening to prevent Ashley's suffering reliably indicate the total consequences for *everyone* until the end of time, including Ashley's soul in subsequent births.

Of course, the debate between skeptical theists and proponents of the moral paralysis objection is quite complex and intricate, so a full defense of Howard-Snyder's line of response to this objection is beyond the scope of this chapter. Minimally, I hope to have established that the question whether a skeptical theist position such as Sri Ramakrishna's leads to moral paralysis remains far from settled, since it seems possible to formulate our common-sense moral principle so as not to conflict with skeptical theism.

Even if Sri Ramakrishna's skeptical theism is philosophically and morally sound, one might still object to his saint-making theodicy. Stanley Kane has raised an objection to John Hick's soul-making theodicy—which will be discussed in the next chapter—that arguably applies to Sri Ramakrishna's saint-making theodicy as well. According to Kane, Hick fails to prove that evil is logically necessary in a soul-making environment:

Soul-making, Hick teaches, requires the development of such traits as fortitude, courage, compassion. This, we are told, justifies the existence of many evils, since—according to this theodicy—these evils are a logically necessary condition for the development of such traits. This last claim, however, can be challenged. We can imagine situations where these traits could be displayed even though there is no actual evil existing. Courage and fortitude, for instance, could manifest themselves as the persistence, steadfastness, and perseverance it takes to accomplish well any difficult or demanding long-range task—the writing of a doctoral dissertation, for example, or training for and competing in the Olympic Games.<sup>65</sup>

It is easy enough to adapt Kane's objection to Sri Ramakrishna's saint-making theodicy. Kane might argue that Sri Ramakrishna's saint-making theodicy fails to prove that evil is *necessary* in a saint-making environment. Couldn't a world with little or no evil serve as an environment for saint-making? Couldn't ethical traits

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65. G. Stanley Kane, "The Failure of Soul-Making Theodicy," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 6 (1975), 2.

such as compassion, courage, and fortitude be developed through activities such as intense long-term athletic training or the writing of a doctoral dissertation, which do not involve the existence of evil?

We can defend Sri Ramakrishna's saint-making theodicy against Kane's objection in two ways. First, Kane's assumption that long-term activities such as Olympic training and dissertation writing do not involve evil is disputable. Surely, suffering is a paradigmatic instance of evil, and anyone who has written a doctoral dissertation or trained for the Olympic games can attest to the fact that these demanding activities typically do involve at least some suffering, either physical, mental, or both. Indeed, a case can be made that the cultivation of ethical qualities *requires* us to cope with, and learn from, the various forms of suffering we undergo in the course of these activities. Arguably, then, Kane's examples of dissertation writing and Olympic training support Sri Ramakrishna's saint-making theodicy, since they illustrate how some amount of suffering is logically necessary for the building of character.

Second, even if Kane is right that ethical traits such as courage and compassion can be cultivated in the absence of evil, Sri Ramakrishna's saint-making theodicy emphasizes the telos not of ethical perfection but of spiritual saintliness, which goes far beyond any ethical ideal. From Sri Ramakrishna's perspective, an environment meant to foster the cultivation of saintly qualities—such as love of God, purity in thought and deed, and complete indifference to worldly pleasures—*does* require evil and suffering. It is worth recalling Sri Ramakrishna's most explicit formulation of his saint-making theodicy: "There is no doubt that anger, lust, and greed are evils. Why, then, has God created them? In order to create saints. One becomes a saint by conquering the senses" (*K* 37 / *G* 97). According to Sri Ramakrishna, anger, lust, and greed are themselves "evils," and one makes progress toward saintliness precisely by struggling with, and eventually conquering, these evil passions. Since Sri Ramakrishna defines a saint as someone who has conquered evil passions such as lust and greed, the cultivation of saintliness logically requires the presence of evil. Therefore, while Kane's objection may arguably apply to Hick's soul-making theodicy, it does not apply to Sri Ramakrishna's saint-making theodicy, which holds that the persistent struggle to overcome one's own evil passions is a necessary precondition for the attainment of saintliness.

Even if one grants the internal coherence of Sri Ramakrishna's theodicy, one might still object that his theodicy presupposes the truth of a host of highly controversial doctrines, such as *karma*, rebirth, universal salvation, and a panentheistic metaphysics. Why should we believe that these doctrines are true? In response to this question, we should note, first of all, that even if Sri Ramakrishna's theodicy presupposes the truth of certain controversial metaphysical doctrines, it is no worse off than other theodicies—Hindu, Christian, Islamic, or

otherwise—since *every* theodicy is based on a controversial theological worldview. Traditional Christian theodicies, for instance, presuppose the doctrines of Adam's fall and original sin, which are difficult—if not impossible—to verify.

Moreover, Sri Ramakrishna's theodicy has the unique advantage that it is based on his own mystical experiences, which—as I argued in chapter 6—have at least some evidential value. As we have seen, Sri Ramakrishna's ultimate theodical appeal to a panentheistic worldview is rooted in his own spiritual experience of *viññāna*. He also had numerous other theodically significant mystical experiences, four of which are especially worth highlighting. First, Sri Ramakrishna had countless mystical experiences of God as the loving and compassionate Divine Mother who is ever eager to protect and help Her creatures.<sup>66</sup> Sri Ramakrishna often emphasized the Divine Mother's boundless love for Her children: "My Mother! Who is my Mother? Ah, She is the Mother of the Universe. It is She who creates and preserves the world, who always protects Her children, and who grants whatever they desire: *dharma* [righteousness], *artha* [wealth], *kāma* [worldly pleasures], *mokṣa* [spiritual liberation]" (*K* 306 / *G* 321). Indeed, Sri Ramakrishna points out that the love and compassion of parents toward their children are but pale reflections of God's infinite love and compassion: "The love that you see in parents is God's love: She has given it to them to preserve Her creation. The compassion that you see in the kind-hearted is God's compassion: She has given it to them to protect the helpless" (*K* 1121 / *G* 671). Sri Ramakrishna's mystical experience of the infinitely compassionate Divine Mother bolsters his theodical claim that God has created this world as a saint-making environment in which evil is inevitable. Just as a loving mother sometimes allows her children to suffer in order to inculcate in them certain ethical virtues, our perfectly loving Divine Mother permits us to experience evil and suffering in order to help us grow into spiritually mature children of God.

Second, Sri Ramakrishna sometimes had mystical experiences that confirmed the necessity of evil in God's creation. Take his striking report of an unusual mystical vision of the Divine Mother:

Do you know what I saw just now? A divine form—a vision of the Divine Mother. She had a son in Her womb. She gave birth to it and the next instant began to swallow it; and as much of it as went into Her mouth became void [*śūnya*]. It was revealed to me that everything is void. The Divine Mother said to me, as it were: "Come confusion! Come delusion! Come! [*Lāg! Lāg! Lāg bhelki! Lāg!*]" (*K* 940 / *G* 870)<sup>67</sup>

66. See, for instance, *K* 190 / *G* 225 and *K* 281–82 / *G* 299.

67. For a description of a similar mystical experience, see *LP* I.ii.121 / *DP* 268.

In this mystical vision, Sri Ramakrishna gained direct insight into the divine mystery that God is the destroyer as well as the creator. At many places in the *Kathāmṛta*, Sri Ramakrishna uses the expression “*Lāg! Lāg! Lāg bhelki! Lāg!*” to denote the bewildering words of a magician as he performs a trick for his audience. He also often likens the magician’s magic to God’s world-bewitching *māyā*, which deludes us into seeing things as they are not. Sri Ramakrishna’s vision of God as a mother giving birth to, and then swallowing, her baby reveals to him that evil and destruction are an integral part of the loving God’s cosmic *līlā*, even if the finite human intellect is unable to grasp fully why this is the case. From Sri Ramakrishna’s standpoint, the destructive aspect of God’s creation appears repulsive or cruel to us because we are deluded by God’s *māyā*, which prevents us from understanding God’s ways. On the basis of his own esoteric mystical experiences, Sri Ramakrishna affirms the theodical mystery that God is perfectly loving in spite of the fact that there is so much evil and suffering in the world.

Third, Sri Ramakrishna did not appeal to the theodically crucial doctrines of *karma* and rebirth as intellectual hypotheses but as facts revealed to him directly through mystical experience. He frequently claimed that he gained knowledge of the previous births of many of his disciples through mystical visions.<sup>68</sup> Moreover, he privately told a number of his intimate disciples that he himself was an *avatāra* who came as Rāma and Kṛṣṇa in previous incarnations (LP I.ii.93 / DP 238).

Fourth, Sri Ramakrishna’s Advaitic experience of nondual Brahman in *nirvikalpa samādhi* has radical implications for theodicy. Recall that in his response to Mill’s argument from evil, he observes: “One is aware of pleasure and pain, birth and death, disease and grief, as long as one is identified with the body. All these belong to the body alone, and not to the Ātman. . . . Attaining Knowledge of the Ātman, one looks on pleasure and pain, birth and death, as a dream” (K 229 / G 257). He suggests here that the problem of evil seems so urgent to us because of our mistaken identification with the body-mind complex. The moment we attain mystical knowledge of our true nature as the transcendental Ātman, the problem of evil will lose its urgency, since the eternal and pure Ātman is untouched by evil and suffering. Sri Ramakrishna’s theodical appeal to the Advaitic knowledge of the Ātman is rooted in his own experiences of *nirvikalpa samādhi*, when his mind would merge into the nondual Ātman just as a salt doll melts into the ocean. Sri Ramakrishna himself reported having been in the state of *nirvikalpa samādhi* continuously for six months (LP I.iii.31 / DP 419–20). He also frequently emphasized that one who experiences *nirvikalpa samādhi* is “overwhelmed with bliss” (K 182 / G 218). The theodical significance of Sri Ramakrishna’s appeal to the mystical knowledge of the Ātman is evident: the supreme bliss of *ātmajñāna*

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68. See, for instance, K 894–95 / G 831 and K 1013 / G 934.



will make us look upon our own past suffering as inconsequential and dream-like. Crucially, since Sri Ramakrishna accepts the doctrine of universal salvation, he also affirms that everyone without exception will eventually attain this salvific knowledge of the Ātman. An essential part of Sri Ramakrishna's theodicy, then, is his thesis that the salvific spiritual knowledge of the Ātman awaiting us all is so infinitely rewarding and blissful that it will outweigh all the suffering we will endure in the course of our many embodiments.

Stoeber's interesting study, *Evil and the Mystics' God: Towards a Mystical Theodicy* (1992), is quite relevant in this regard. Stoeber argues that we should take seriously the "mystical theodical evidence" found in the testimony of such well-known Western mystics as Meister Eckhart, Pseudo-Dionysius, Plotinus, and Jakob Böhme.<sup>69</sup> As Stoeber recognizes, however, perhaps the most serious challenge facing any mystical theodicy is that of justifying the mystic's authority: why should we *non*mystics believe that a mystic's experiences are veridical? In response to this challenge, Stoeber presents three arguments in support of the "theodical authority" of mystics such as Eckhart.<sup>70</sup> First, the nonmystic might have had nonmystical experiences—such as emotional or aesthetic experiences—that are "somewhat analogous" to Eckhart's mystical experiences.<sup>71</sup> Second, Eckhart's theodical authority is substantially strengthened by the fact that numerous other mystics have enjoyed mystical experiences very similar to Eckhart's.<sup>72</sup> Third, as Stoeber puts it, "though the mystical experiences Eckhart describes are not verifiable by the nonmystic, they are, according to him and other mystics, verifiable by those who undergo the appropriate practices."<sup>73</sup> In other words, just as we can verify the empirical claims of a scientist by performing the relevant experiment, we can verify the theodical claims of mystics by practicing the (admittedly arduous) spiritual disciplines performed by the mystics themselves.

Stoeber admits that these arguments are incomplete as they stand, but we can strengthen Stoeber's case by drawing on the arguments in the previous chapter of this book.<sup>74</sup> The evidential force we ascribe to mystical theodical claims depends on the extent to which we find the argument from experience convincing. In chapter 6, I began to defend the argument from experience and concluded that we have good reason to believe that mystical experiences have at least *some* evidential value. Hence, if we grant even a little weight to the argument from experience,

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69. Stoeber, *Evil and the Mystics' God*, 116.

70. Stoeber, *Evil and the Mystics' God*, 119.

71. Stoeber, *Evil and the Mystics' God*, 119.

72. Stoeber, *Evil and the Mystics' God*, 121.

73. Stoeber, *Evil and the Mystics' God*, 121.

74. Stoeber, *Evil and the Mystics' God*, 193.

then a mystical theodicy such as Sri Ramakrishna's, other things being equal, has greater evidential support than nonmystical theodicies.

My reconstruction and preliminary defense of Sri Ramakrishna's sophisticated response to the problem of evil are now complete. The next chapter ventures into cross-cultural territory by comparing Sri Ramakrishna's approach with both the skeptical theist position of William Alston and the soul-making theodicy of Hick.

## 8

A CROSS-CULTURAL APPROACH TO  
THE PROBLEM OF EVILSRI RAMAKRISHNA, THE ROWE-ALSTON  
DEBATE, AND HICK'S SOUL-MAKING THEODICY

Although the problem of evil is a perennial one that cuts across religions and cultures, most Western discussions of the problem of evil have tended to be rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition. What we need now is a broader cross-cultural approach to the problem of evil that draws on both Western and non-Western philosophical traditions. Building on the previous chapter, I will make a modest contribution to this cross-cultural endeavor by bringing Sri Ramakrishna into dialogue with William Alston and John Hick, two of the most prominent recent philosophers to have responded to the problem of evil.

Section I explores the philosophical resonances between Sri Ramakrishna's skeptical theist position—reconstructed in section II of the previous chapter—with Alston's skeptical theist refutation of William Rowe's influential argument from evil against God's existence. Alston refutes Rowe's argument from evil by arguing that in light of our cognitive limitations, we are not rationally justified in believing that "God could have no sufficient reason for permitting some of the evils we find in the world."<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, I draw on Alston's sophisticated skeptical theist response to Rowe as a means of developing and defending Sri Ramakrishna's own skeptical theist position. On the other, I argue that Alston's failure to consider Indian *karma*-based theodicies—such as Sri Ramakrishna's saint-making theodicy—significantly weakens his response to the problem of evil.

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1. William Alston, "The Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition," in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 102. Alston's article was originally published in *Philosophical Perspectives* 5 (1991), 29–67.

Sections II and III compare Sri Ramakrishna's saint-making theodicy with Hick's widely discussed "soul-making" theodicy. According to Hick, God created this world not as a hedonistic paradise but as a soul-making environment in which we can grow into spiritually mature children of God by encountering both good and evil. In section II, I show that Hick's arguments for the necessity of evil in a soul-making environment equally support Sri Ramakrishna's saint-making theodicy. Moreover, Hick's "use of eschatology to complete theodicy"—his argument that any plausible theodicy must accept universal salvation—helps clarify and strengthen Sri Ramakrishna's own theodical appeal to the doctrine of universal salvation.<sup>2</sup> Section III then critically examines Hick's soul-making theodicy from the standpoint of Sri Ramakrishna. I argue that Hick's theodicy, in spite of its promise, suffers from major weaknesses, which stem from his assumption of a Christian one-life-only paradigm and his neglect of mystical experience. Since Sri Ramakrishna's mystically grounded saint-making theodicy presupposes the doctrines of *karma* and rebirth, it has significant philosophical advantages over Hick's theodicy. Finally, section IV ventures into "metatheodicy" by outlining briefly four criteria for comparing and assessing theodicies across cultures.

## 1. Skeptical Theist Positions in Dialogue:

### Sri Ramakrishna and Alston

In his influential article "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism" (1979), Rowe argues that the existence of instances of apparently pointless suffering makes it reasonable for us to believe that an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good God does not exist.<sup>3</sup> Rowe formulates his argument as follows:

- (1) There exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
- (2) An omniscient, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering it could, unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
- (3) There does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being.<sup>4</sup>

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2. John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, [1966] 2010), 351.

3. William Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, ed. Howard-Snyder, 1–11. The article was originally published in *American Philosophy Quarterly* 16.4 (1979), 335–41.

4. Rowe, "The Problem of Evil," 2.

According to (1), certain instances of suffering in this world are gratuitous or pointless,<sup>5</sup> in that God could have prevented them without losing a “greater good” or permitting an “equally bad or worse” evil. While Rowe admits that he cannot *prove* that (1) is true, he argues that we are rationally justified in believing (1) on the basis of our observation of instances of intense suffering in the world. Rowe provides the example of a fawn trapped in a forest fire who suffers from terrible agony for several days and then dies. According to Rowe, the fawn’s suffering appears to be pointless, since “there does not appear to be any greater good such that the prevention of the fawn’s suffering would require either the loss of that good or the occurrence of an evil equally bad or worse.”<sup>6</sup>

In a crucial move, Rowe argues that the fact that the fawn’s suffering *appears* to be pointless makes it reasonable for us to believe that the fawn’s suffering is, *in fact*, pointless. There are numerous “instances of seemingly pointless human and animal suffering”—such as the fawn’s suffering—that make it reasonable for us to believe that (1) is true, even if we cannot be certain that (1) is true.<sup>7</sup> Rowe argues that since we are rationally justified in believing (1) and since (2) expresses a “basic belief common to many theists and nontheists” alike, it is reasonable for us to believe that an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good God does not exist.<sup>8</sup>

In “The Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition” (1991), Alston refutes Rowe’s argument from evil by attacking Rowe’s (1), which asserts that there are instances of pointless suffering.<sup>9</sup> Alston denies (1) by rejecting the inference Rowe uses to justify (1)—the inference from “so far as I can tell, *p*” to “*p*” or “probably, *p*.”<sup>10</sup> As we have seen, Rowe infers from “There *appear* to be instances of pointless suffering” to “There *are* instances of pointless suffering.” Alston argues that Rowe’s inference is unjustified because it presupposes “an unwarranted confidence in our ability to determine that God could have no sufficient reason for permitting some of the evils we find in the world.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, Alston defends the skeptical theist position that in light of our cognitive limitations, we are not rationally justified in believing (1), which amounts to a

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5. Throughout this chapter, I take “gratuitous suffering” and “pointless suffering” to be synonyms.

6. Rowe, “The Problem of Evil,” 4.

7. Rowe, “The Problem of Evil,” 5.

8. Rowe, “The Problem of Evil,” 5.

9. Alston uses the term “gratuitous,” which is synonymous with Rowe’s term “pointless.”

10. Alston, “The Inductive Argument from Evil,” 102.

11. Alston, “The Inductive Argument from Evil,” 102.

“very ambitious negative existential claim, viz., that there is (can be) no sufficient divine reason for permitting a certain case of suffering, E.”<sup>12</sup>

Alston’s strategy for justifying this skeptical theist position is to show that Rowe’s (1) unjustifiably rules out various “live possibilities”—that is, possible divine reasons for permitting evil.<sup>13</sup> Alston focuses on the two cases of apparently pointless evil mentioned by Rowe: the case of the fawn (whom Alston names “Bambi”) who dies in a forest fire and the case of Sue, a five-year-old girl who is raped and killed by her mother’s boyfriend. Alston concedes to Rowe that no known “sufferer-centered” theodicy—that is, a theodicy that shows the benefits of suffering for the sufferer—provides a morally sufficient reason for God to have permitted Bambi’s or Sue’s suffering.<sup>14</sup> As Alston puts it, no sufferer-centered theodicies—such as Hick’s soul-making theodicy or Eleonore Stump’s “will-fixing” theodicy—apply to the cases of Bambi and Sue, since the sufferer “has no chance to respond to the suffering in the desired way, except in an afterlife.”<sup>15</sup>

Nonetheless, Alston argues, in a skeptical theist vein, that we are still not rationally justified in excluding the live possibility that God has a sufferer-centered reason for permitting the fawn’s or Sue’s suffering that has “never been dreamed of in our theodicies.”<sup>16</sup> Alston then goes on to consider several *non*-sufferer-centered theodicies—that is, theodicies that show the benefits of a particular creature’s suffering for others or for God.<sup>17</sup> He mentions the free-will theodicy and Bruce Reichenbach’s natural law theodicy as examples of non-sufferer-centered theodicies. Alston points out that no non-sufferer-centered theodicy can provide a *sufficient* reason for God to permit evil, since a perfectly good God “would not wholly sacrifice the welfare of one of His intelligent creatures simply in order to achieve a good for others, or for Himself.”<sup>18</sup> However, Alston argues that non-sufferer-centered theodicies can still provide *part* of God’s reason for permitting the suffering of Bambi and Sue.<sup>19</sup>

In sum, then, Alston (1991) argues that Rowe’s (1) is unjustified because human cognitive limitations prevent us from excluding two live possibilities—first, the

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12. Alston, “The Inductive Argument from Evil,” 102.

13. Alston, “The Inductive Argument from Evil,” 102.

14. Alston, “The Inductive Argument from Evil,” 106.

15. Alston, “The Inductive Argument from Evil,” 106.

16. Alston, “The Inductive Argument from Evil,” 109.

17. Alston, “The Inductive Argument from Evil,” 111.

18. Alston, “The Inductive Argument from Evil,” 111.

19. Alston, “The Inductive Argument from Evil,” 111.

possibility that God has a sufferer-centered reason for permitting Bambi's and Sue's suffering that lies beyond our ken, and second, the possibility that part of God's reason for permitting Bambi's and Sue's suffering has to do with benefits to those other than the sufferer. Alston (1991) also specifies some of the cognitive limitations that hinder our ability to determine God's possible reasons for permitting a given case of suffering, including a dearth of data, the world's unmanageable complexity, and our ignorance of the full range of theodical possibilities.<sup>20</sup>

In his 1996 response to Alston, Rowe rightly points out that "Alston's final conclusion is that he must appeal to goods *beyond our ken* in order to argue that we cannot be justified in believing that God has no sufficient reason to permit E1 [the fawn case] or E2 [the Sue case]."<sup>21</sup> According to Rowe, Alston concedes too much by admitting that "no good we *know of* justifies God in permitting E1 and E2."<sup>22</sup> Rowe argues that Alston's claim about the live possibility of "goods beyond our ken" is too weak on its own to refute Rowe's (1), which is based on the plausible assumption—insufficiently challenged by Alston—that if no goods "within our intellectual grasp" are "justifying for God" with respect to E1 and E2, then we are justified in believing that God *has* no sufficient reason for permitting E1 and E2.

In "Some (Temporarily) Final Thoughts on Evidential Arguments from Evil" (1996), Alston responds to Rowe (1996) by considerably modifying his skeptical theist position. Alston now admits that his 1991 argument was not an effective refutation of Rowe's argument from evil, since he spent too much time rehearsing theodicies that did *not* apply to the cases of the fawn's and Sue's suffering and he did not adequately defend his thesis that Rowe unjustifiably excludes the "live possibility of divine reasons unenvisaged by us."<sup>23</sup> Alston's new strategy is to "drop the rehearsal of theodicies" and to argue that his latter thesis about the live possibility of divine reasons beyond our ken is alone "sufficient to take up whatever slack there is, including 100% if needed."<sup>24</sup> While admitting that "we cannot discern any sufficient divine reason for permitting Bambi's and Sue's suffering," Alston claims that we are not justified in concluding that there *is* no sufficient divine reason for permitting these cases of horrendous suffering. According to Alston, the inference at the basis of Rowe's (1)—namely, the inference from "I

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20. Alston, "The Inductive Argument from Evil," 119–20.

21. William Rowe, "The Evidential Argument from Evil: A Second Look," in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, ed. Howard-Snyder, 281.

22. Rowe, "The Evidential Argument from Evil," 281.

23. William Alston, "Some (Temporarily) Final Thoughts on Evidential Arguments from Evil," in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, ed. Howard-Snyder, 312.

24. Alston, "Some (Temporarily) Final Thoughts," 312.



can't see any" to "There isn't any"—is unjustified in light of "our cognitive powers, vis-à-vis the reasons an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being might have for His decisions and actions."<sup>25</sup>

Alston (1996) argues, by means of a series of intuitively plausible analogies, that it is unreasonable for us to think that our drastically limited knowledge of God's possible reasons for acting exhausts the range of possibilities available to an omnipotent and omniscient being. For instance, he writes: "Having only the sketchiest grasp of chess, I fail to see any reason for Karpov [a chess master] to have made the move he did at a certain point in a game. Does that entitle me to conclude that he had no good reason for making that move?"<sup>26</sup> The answer is obviously "no." Similarly, Alston argues that in light of the immeasurably vast cognitive gulf between our finite human minds and the omniscient mind of God, we are never justified in inferring from the fact that we cannot think of any morally sufficient reason for God to have permitted the fawn's or Sue's suffering to the conclusion that God *had* no sufficient reason for permitting their suffering. Alston puts this point as follows:

Surely an omniscient, omnipotent being is further removed from any of us in this respect than a brilliant physicist is from one innocent of physics, or a Mozart is from one innocent of music, or Karpov is from a neophyte. Surely the extent to which God can envisage reasons for permitting a given state of affairs exceeds our ability to do so by at least as much as Einstein's ability to discern the reason for a physical theory exceeds the ability of one ignorant of physics. . . . Given what we can know of our limitations . . . how can we suppose that we are in a position to estimate the extent to which the possibilities we can envisage for divine reasons for permitting evils even come close to exhausting the possibilities open to an omniscient being?<sup>27</sup>

On the basis of such reasoning, Alston believes he has shown that the inference at the basis of Rowe's (1)—the inference from "Certain instances of suffering seem pointless" to "Certain instances of suffering *are* pointless"—is unjustified and, hence, that Rowe's argument from evil fails.

Sri Ramakrishna's skeptical theist position is akin to, but not identical with, Alston's position(s). As I discussed in section II of the previous chapter, Sri Ramakrishna refutes Vidyāsāgar's and John Stuart Mill's Rowe-like arguments

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25. Alston, "Some (Temporarily) Final Thoughts," 316–17.

26. Alston, "Some (Temporarily) Final Thoughts," 317.

27. Alston, "Some (Temporarily) Final Thoughts," 318.

from evil against God's existence by claiming that in light of human cognitive limitations, they are not justified in inferring from *their* inability to think of a good reason for God to permit a certain instance of horrendous evil to the conclusion that God *had* no good reason for doing so. Accordingly, Sri Ramakrishna remarks in an Alstonian vein, "How can we understand the ways of God through our small intellects [*kṣudrabuddhi*]?" (*K* 105 / *G* 153). He would also frequently emphasize the vast gulf between our finite intellects and the omniscient mind of God by asking, "Can a one-seer pot hold ten seers of milk?" (*K* 229 / *G* 257). Sri Ramakrishna and Alston, then, adopt the same basic skeptical theist strategy for refuting evidential arguments from evil—though, as we will see, they differ on some points of detail.

Moreover, many of Alston's arguments for his thesis about our cognitive limitations vis-à-vis God's reasons for acting lend support to Sri Ramakrishna's skeptical theist position. I think Sri Ramakrishna would have embraced Alston (1996)'s chess master analogy, since it shows, in effect, how Sri Ramakrishna's comparison of the finite human intellect to a "one-seer pot" applies to the problem of evil. Just as a neophyte in chess who fails to see why Karpov made the particular move he did would obviously not be justified in inferring that Karpov *had* no good reason for making that move, Vidyāsāgar may not be able to think of a good reason for God to have permitted Genghis Khan's mass slaughter, but he is not rationally justified in inferring that God *had* no good reason for permitting Khan's slaughter.

Alston (1991)'s detailed specification of our cognitive limits also helps fill out and strengthen Sri Ramakrishna's skeptical theist position. The first two of the six cognitive limits he mentions are especially relevant to our discussion:

1. *Lack of data.* This includes, inter alia, the secrets of the human heart, the detailed constitution and structure of the universe, and the remote past and future, including the afterlife if any.
2. *Complexity greater than we can handle.* Most notably there is the difficulty of holding enormous complexes of fact—different possible worlds or different systems of natural law—together in the mind sufficiently for comparative evaluation.<sup>28</sup>

Sri Ramakrishna, in the course of discussing the dizzyingly complex and mysterious workings of the law of *karma*, mentions both these cognitive limits emphasized by Alston:

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28. Alston, "The Inductive Argument from Evil," 120.

It is said in the scriptures that only those who have been charitable in their former births get money in this life. But to tell you the truth, this world is God's *māyā*. And there are many confusing things in this realm of *māyā*. One cannot comprehend them. The ways of God are inscrutable indeed. . . . There is much confusion in this world of His *māyā*. One can by no means say that "this" will come after "that" or "this" will produce "that." (K 196 / G 397–98)

Sri Ramakrishna clearly rejects an overly simplistic view of *karma*, according to which a virtuous action will always yield material benefit while a vicious action will not. Just as Alston emphasizes that the complexity of God's creation is "greater than we can handle," Sri Ramakrishna points out that the workings of *karma* are simply too complex for us to make pat causal judgments about why one person suffers in this life while another person prospers. As I argued in section III of the previous chapter, one major reason for the complexity of the workings of *karma* is the fact that the law of *karma*, for Sri Ramakrishna, is not primarily retributive but teleologically oriented toward saint-making. Moreover, just as Alston emphasizes our lack of data about the afterlife and the "secrets of the human heart," Sri Ramakrishna emphasizes our lack of data vis-à-vis the past and future lives of ourselves and others—data which is obviously relevant to understanding the *karmic* consequences of a creature's actions. As a result of this lack of data as well as the sheer complexity of the workings of *karma*, we are often not in a position to understand what role a given person's suffering might play in his or her spiritual journey toward sainthood.

While there are striking similarities between Sri Ramakrishna's and Alston's skeptical theist strategies, I would argue that Sri Ramakrishna's skeptical theist position—when seen as part of his broader multidimensional response to the problem of evil—constitutes a more effective refutation of arguments from evil than either of Alston's skeptical theist positions. Alston (1996), we should recall, simply concedes to Rowe that "we cannot discern any sufficient divine reason for permitting Bambi's and Sue's suffering."<sup>29</sup> Accordingly, Alston's 1996 strategy for refuting Rowe is to rely entirely on the argument that in light of our cognitive limitations, we can never rule out the live possibility that God had a sufficient reason for permitting Bambi's and Sue's suffering that lies *beyond* our ken, and hence, that we are not rationally justified in inferring from "I see no sufficient reason to permit E" to "There *is* no sufficient reason to permit E."

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29. Alston, "Some (Temporarily) Final Thoughts," 316.

However, this is a highly controversial argument that has been contested by numerous philosophers. Bruce Russell, for instance, seeks to show the intuitive implausibility of Alston's skeptical theism by means of an analogy:

[T]he view that there are reasons beyond our ken that would justify God, if he exists, in allowing all the suffering we see [is] like the view that there are blue crows beyond our powers of observation. Once we have conducted the relevant search for crows (looking all over the world in different seasons and at crows at different stages of maturity), we are justified in virtue of that search in believing there are no crows beyond our powers of observation which are relevantly different from the crows we've seen. . . . Similarly, once we've conducted the relevant search for moral reasons to justify allowing the relevant suffering. . . we are justified in believing that there are no morally sufficient reasons for allowing that suffering.<sup>30</sup>

While Alston tries to disarm Russell's objection by arguing for the inappropriateness of the blue crow analogy,<sup>31</sup> it is hard to deny that Rowe-like arguments from apparently pointless suffering derive a great deal of their intuitive plausibility from the fact that we *do* seem to be justified in inferring from "I see no divine reason to permit E" to "There is no divine reason to permit E."<sup>32</sup> Since Alston's 1996 skeptical theist position depends entirely on an appeal to the live possibility of divine reasons beyond our ken, his refutation of Rowe's argument from evil fails if belief in this live possibility is shown to be unreasonable.

Sri Ramakrishna's skeptical theism comes closer to Alston's 1991 position than to his 1996 position. As we should recall, Alston (1991) argues not only for the live possibility of divine reasons *beyond* our ken but also for the live possibility that a non-sufferer-centered theodicy *within* our ken provides part of God's reason for permitting a given instance of suffering. As Alston (1996) acknowledged, the primary weakness of his 1991 argument is that he had to concede that no sufferer-centered theodicy—such as Hick's soul-making theodicy—was a live possibility in the case of Bambi's and Sue's suffering. From Sri Ramakrishna's perspective, however, Alston (1991) need not have made this major concession to Rowe if he had considered non-Western sufferer-centered theodicies, such as Sri Ramakrishna's own saint-making theodicy.

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30. Bruce Russell, "Defenseless," in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, ed. Howard-Snyder, 194.

31. Alston, "Some (Temporarily) Final Thoughts," 319.

32. I am in agreement with Rowe on this point. See Rowe, "The Evidential Argument from Evil," 282.

As I will argue in section III, Hick's soul-making theodicy is not a live possibility in the case of the suffering of Bambi, Sue, or Genghis Khan's victims precisely because Hick's Christian theodicy presupposes a one-life-only paradigm that makes it impossible to explain how these instances of suffering could plausibly contribute to the soul-making process. By contrast, since Sri Ramakrishna's saint-making theodicy presupposes the doctrines of *karma* and rebirth, it *is* a live possibility even in the cases of Bambi, Sue, and Khan's victims. Sri Ramakrishna would view their suffering as the *karmic* consequence of their own past actions in that life or in a previous life. If Bambi, Sue, and Khan's victims will all be reborn again on this earth until they attain spiritual salvation, it is a live possibility that the undeniably terrible suffering they endured in this life contributed in some way to their saint-making journey over the course of many lifetimes.

Of course, Sri Ramakrishna would admit that there is still an element of inscrutability and mysteriousness in the cases of the suffering of Bambi, Sue, and Khan's victims, since it is difficult for us to discern precisely *how* their suffering served the purpose of saint-making. To illustrate the element of inscrutability in these cases of suffering, we can contrast these special cases of suffering with the hypothetical case of an extremely selfish person who undergoes a miraculous ethical and spiritual transformation as a result of the extreme suffering he endured as a cancer patient. In the case of this cancer patient, we can easily imagine how his cancer might have been the *karmic* consequence of his own earlier selfish deeds, and we can also directly *see* how this person's suffering served the saint-making process, since he became a more loving and compassionate person before our eyes.

However, not all cases of suffering can be so neatly explained in terms of a saint-making theodicy. Since the saint-making process extends through many lives and the precise mechanics of the law of *karma* are not known to us, it should come as no surprise that we will sometimes be unable to discern precisely how a particular instance of suffering contributes to the sufferer's saint-making journey. Nonetheless, the element of inscrutability admitted by Sri Ramakrishna in the case of the suffering of creatures like Bambi, Sue, and Khan's victims is significantly more restricted than the inscrutability admitted by Alston: while Alston (1996) concedes that we can discern *no* divine reason for permitting these instances of suffering, Sri Ramakrishna maintains that we cannot rule out the live possibility that God permitted these instances of suffering to further the saint-making process of the sufferers. From Sri Ramakrishna's standpoint, what remains inscrutable to us in the cases of Bambi, Sue, and Khan's victims is the precise *role* their suffering played in their respective saint-making journeys.

Hence, I would suggest that Sri Ramakrishna's skeptical theist position shares the argumentative strengths of Alston's 1991 and 1996 positions while lacking their limitations, precisely because Sri Ramakrishna's *karma*-based saint-making theodicy remains a live possibility even in the case of Bambi, Sue, and Khan's

victims. While Alston (1991) was only able to defend the live possibility that non-sufferer-centered theodicies provide *part* of God's reason for permitting these instances of extreme suffering, Sri Ramakrishna defends the live possibility that his sufferer-centered saint-making theodicy provides a *sufficient* divine reason for permitting suffering. Moreover, whereas Alston (1996) relies entirely on an appeal to the live possibility of divine reasons beyond our ken, Sri Ramakrishna does not, as it were, put all his eggs in that one skeptical theist basket. Instead, Sri Ramakrishna argues that proponents of evidential arguments from evil—such as Vidyāsāgar, J.S. Mill, and Rowe—are not rationally justified in ruling out either of *two* live possibilities: first, the live possibility that a *karma*-based saint-making theodicy furnishes a morally sufficient reason for God to have permitted the suffering of Bambi, Sue, and Khan's victims, and second, the live possibility that God had reasons for permitting these instances of suffering that lie beyond our ken.<sup>33</sup>

Alston (1991) clarifies that his skeptical theist argument only establishes that we should remain *agnostic* about the truth of Rowe's (1), the claim that there are instances of pointless suffering, but does not establish that we are rationally justified in asserting the *denial* of (1)—that is, that there are *no* instances of pointless suffering. Since any “successful theodicy” would have to take this further step of showing that there are no instances of pointless suffering, Alston asks the important question whether his skeptical theism is compatible with the project of theodicy.<sup>34</sup> Alston answers in the affirmative:

[M]y position is that we could justifiably believe, or even know, the denial of [Rowe's] 1, and that in one of two ways. We might have sufficient grounds for believing in the existence of God—whether from arguments of natural theology, religious experience, or whatever—including sufficient grounds for taking God to be omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good, and that could put us in a position to warrantably deny 1. Or God might reveal to us that 1 is false, and we might be justified in accepting the message as coming from God. Indeed, revelation might provide not only justification for denying 1 but also justification for beliefs about what God's reasons are for permitting this or that case of suffering or type of suffering, thereby putting us in a position to construct a theodicy of a rather ambitious sort.<sup>35</sup>

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33. Recently, Derk Pereboom has defended a skeptical theist position similar to Sri Ramakrishna's—one that supplements skeptical theism with “partially filled-out” theodical possibilities. See Pereboom's article, “Libertarianism and Theological Determinism,” in *Free Will and Theism: Connections, Contingencies, and Concerns*, ed. Kevin Timpe and Daniel Speak (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 120–27.

34. Alston, “The Inductive Argument from Evil,” 99.

35. Alston, “The Inductive Argument from Evil,” 99.

Although Alston himself does not provide a theodicy of any sort, he makes a compelling argument for the compatibility of his skeptical theist position with theodicy.<sup>36</sup> Interestingly, Alston specifically suggests that certain religious experiences—such as the direct experience of an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good God—could provide “sufficient grounds” for denying Rowe’s (1). As I argued in sections V and VI of the previous chapter, Sri Ramakrishna had numerous mystical experiences that have important theodical implications—such as his panentheistic experience of *vijñāna* and his experience of the Divine Mother giving birth to, and then swallowing, Her baby. Hence, while Alston is content to establish the *possibility* that skeptical theism is compatible with theodicy, Sri Ramakrishna goes much further than Alston by combining his skeptical theist position with a full-blown theodicy based on a saint-making teleology and a panentheistic metaphysics.

Of course, Alston is only one among many recent philosophers who have defended skeptical theist strategies for refuting evidential arguments from evil. In a recent edited collection, contemporary philosophers have discussed numerous types of skeptical theism, including Stephen Wykstra’s influential CORNEA-based skeptical theism, Todd Long’s “minimal skeptical theism,” and Andrew Cullison’s “two new versions of skeptical theism.”<sup>37</sup> Philosophers can enrich and broaden their understanding of the range of skeptical theist arguments by considering skeptical theist positions in non-Western philosophical traditions, including the sophisticated form of skeptical theism defended by Sri Ramakrishna.

## II. Soul-Making Theodicies in Dialogue: Sri Ramakrishna and Hick

In sections III through V of the previous chapter, I reconstructed Sri Ramakrishna’s distinctive theodicy, which combines a saint-making teleological framework with hard theological determinism and a panentheistic metaphysics. In this and the next section, I will bring Sri Ramakrishna’s saint-making theodicy into dialogue with Hick’s soul-making theodicy, as presented in his groundbreaking book, *Evil and the God of Love* (1966). I argue that many of Hick’s arguments in defense of his soul-making theodicy clarify and support key aspects of Sri Ramakrishna’s

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36. See the beginning of section III of the previous chapter for a detailed explanation of how Sri Ramakrishna’s skeptical theism is compatible with his theodicy.

37. Trent Dougherty and Justin McBrayer, eds., *Skeptical Theism: New Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).



own saint-making theodicy. At the same time, I identify certain limitations and weaknesses in Hick's theodicy by examining it from a Ramakrishnan standpoint.

Hick develops a "soul-making" theodicy inspired by an idea found in the theology of Saint Irenaeus (c. 200 CE). According to Irenaeus, while we were all created in the "image" of God, we must grow into the "likeness" of God by becoming spiritually perfect. Building on Irenaeus's view, Hick claims that God created us as spiritually immature creatures who will gradually develop into spiritually perfect children of God. Accordingly, God created this world not as a hedonistic paradise but as a soul-making environment "whose primary and overriding purpose is not immediate pleasure but the realizing of the most valuable potentialities of human personality."<sup>38</sup> Central to Hick's theodicy is his thesis that evil is inevitable in such a soul-making environment, since spiritually immature creatures who do not feel the overwhelming presence of God tend to lead self-centered lives and try to maximize their own happiness at the expense of that of others.<sup>39</sup> Hick also argues that his soul-making theodicy presupposes free will: "If man is to be a being capable of entering into personal relationship with his Maker, and not a mere puppet, he must be endowed with the uncontrollable gift of freedom."<sup>40</sup>

Hick is quick to point out that for the vast majority of people, the soul-making process is rarely brought to fruition in this life. Hence, Hick claims that eschatology is needed to "complete" his soul-making theodicy: the process of soul-making begun in this life will continue in a purgatorial state in the afterlife until each of us evolves into a perfect child of God who is fit to dwell with God in Heaven.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, as I will explain in greater detail later in this section, Hick rejects the traditional Christian doctrine of hell—which he believes is fatal to theodicy—in favor of an eschatology of universal salvation.<sup>42</sup>

The affinities between the theodicies of Hick and Sri Ramakrishna are striking. Both Sri Ramakrishna and Hick maintain that God created this world as a soul-making environment in which evil is inevitable. They both also agree that an eschatology of universal salvation is essential to theodicy. However, their theodicies differ in two key respects. While Hick appeals to a postmortem state of purgatory to explain how a person's soul-making journey continues after this life, Sri Ramakrishna appeals to the Indian doctrines of *karma* and rebirth. Moreover, while Hick claims that free will is essential to his soul-making theodicy, Sri Ramakrishna denies that we are free but maintains that ordinary unenlightened

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38. Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 258.

39. See Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 353 and 237.

40. Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 266.

41. Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 351.

42. Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 341.

people have the *illusion* of free will, which makes them feel morally responsible for their actions. According to Sri Ramakrishna, this feeling of moral responsibility and the telos of universal salvation are all that are necessary for the saint-making process to be valuable and significant, in spite of the fact that God determines everything we do.<sup>43</sup>

While a full discussion of Hick's nuanced justification of the necessity of evil in a soul-making environment is beyond the scope of this chapter, I will focus here on two of Hick's especially powerful arguments. According to Hick, the familiar Christian conception of God as the "heavenly Father" points to the profound truth that God's attitude toward human beings is akin to "the attitude of human parents towards their children."<sup>44</sup> Hick makes a persuasive case that God's parental attitude toward His creatures helps explain why He chose to create a world so full of challenges and evils of all kinds:

I think it is clear that a parent who loves his children, and wants them to become the best human beings that they are capable of becoming, does not treat pleasure as the sole and supreme value. Certainly we seek pleasure for our children, and take great delight in obtaining it for them; but we do not desire for them unalloyed pleasure at the expense of their growth in such even greater values as moral integrity, unselfishness, compassion, courage, humour, reverence for the truth, and perhaps above all the capacity for love. . . . A child brought up on the principle that the only or the supreme value is pleasure would not be likely to become an ethically mature adult or an attractive or happy personality. And to most parents it seems more important to try to foster quality and strength of character in their children than to fill their lives at all times with the utmost possible degree of pleasure. If, then, there is any true analogy between God's purpose for his human creatures, and the purpose of loving and wise parents for their children, we have to recognize that the presence of pleasure and the absence of pain cannot be the supreme and overriding end for which the world exists. Rather, this world must be a place of soul-making. And its value is to be judged, not primarily by the quantity of pleasure and pain occurring in it at any particular moment, but by its fitness for its primary purpose, the purpose of soul-making.<sup>45</sup>

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43. See section IV of chapter 7 for a more detailed account of how Sri Ramakrishna reconciles his hard theological determinism with his saint-making theodicy. As note 52 of the previous chapter indicates, contemporary philosophers such as Derk Pereboom and Nick Trakakis lend support to Sri Ramakrishna's position by arguing, against Hick, that soul-making theodicies are perfectly compatible with hard theological determinism.

44. Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 258.

45. Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 258–59.

According to Hick, loving parents sometimes withhold certain pleasures from their children and even allow them to suffer in order to foster in them important values including moral integrity, unselfishness, compassion, and reverence for truth. Similarly, God created a world full of challenges and evils of all kinds—rather than as a hedonistic paradise—in order to provide a soul-making environment that fosters our moral and spiritual growth.

While Hick draws a persuasive “analogy” between God and a loving parent, Sri Ramakrishna went even further than Hick, since he literally looked upon, and experienced, God as his “Divine Mother” and frequently encouraged people to think of God as “our Father and Mother” (*K* 112 / *G* 159). Hick’s argument helps us see the relevance of this pervasive feature of Sri Ramakrishna’s life and teachings to his saint-making theodicy. From Sri Ramakrishna’s perspective, our infinitely loving and wise Divine Mother has provided us with an environment optimally suited for our moral and spiritual growth, and this saint-making environment inevitably contains evils, challenges, and difficulties of various kinds.

Hick also provides a strong counterfactual argument for the necessity of evil in a soul-making environment:

Now we can imagine a paradise in which no one can ever come to any harm. . . . Thus, for example, in such a miraculously pain-free world one who falls accidentally off a high building would presumably float unharmed to the ground; bullets would become insubstantial when fired at a human body; poisons would cease to poison; water to drown, and so on. . . . But . . . a world in which there can be no pain or suffering would also be one in which there can be no moral choices and hence no possibility of moral growth and development. For in a situation in which no one can ever suffer injury or be liable to pain or suffering there would be no distinction between right and wrong action. No action would be morally wrong, because no action could have harmful consequences; and likewise no action would be morally right in contrast to wrong. Whatever the values of such a world, it clearly could not serve a purpose of the development of its inhabitants from self-regarding animality to self-giving love.<sup>46</sup>

Hick plausibly claims that in a “miraculously pain-free world” in which bullets do not kill and water does not drown, the very distinction between morally right

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46. John Hick, “An Irenaean Theodicy,” in C. Robert Mesle, *John Hick’s Theodicy: A Process Humanist Critique* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1991), xxvi–xxvii. The article was originally published in *Encountering Evil: Live Options in Theodicy*, ed. Stephen T. Davis (Atlanta: Westminster / John Knox Press, 1981), 39–68. Hick makes a very similar argument in *Evil and the God of Love* (324–25).

and wrong action would be obliterated, since “no action could have harmful consequences.” Hence, such a pain-free paradise could not foster the development of moral and spiritual values. By means of this counterfactual argument, Hick claims that pain and suffering are a necessary part of a soul-making environment meant to facilitate the cultivation of unselfishness and spiritual growth.

Sri Ramakrishna, as we saw in the previous chapter, responds to the devotee Hari’s question about why there is so much suffering in the world by hinting at a counterfactual argument akin to Hick’s: “This world is the *līlā* of God. It is like a game. In this game there are joy and sorrow, virtue and vice, knowledge and ignorance, good and evil. The game cannot continue if sin and suffering are altogether eliminated from the creation” (*K* 437 / *G* 436). According to Sri Ramakrishna, if “sin and suffering” were absent from God’s creation, then the “game” of God’s cosmic *līlā* would not be able to continue. By coupling this assertion with his central theodical claim that God has created this *līlā* “in order to create saints” (*K* 37 / *G* 97), we can develop Sri Ramakrishna’s suggestive response to Hari along the lines of Hick’s counterfactual argument. That is, in a world devoid of evil and suffering, there would be no distinction between “virtue and vice” and “good and evil,” since our actions would have no harmful consequences; hence, in such a pain-free world, God’s “game” of saint-making would not even get off the ground. Hick’s argument also clarifies and supports Sri Ramakrishna’s gnomic statement that “[k]nowledge of good is possible because of knowledge of evil” (*K* 180 / *G* 216). Without encountering evil and suffering, we would not even be able to conceive of moral virtues or spiritual ideals toward which we could strive.

Finally, Hick’s “use of eschatology to complete theodicy”<sup>47</sup> illuminates the crucial but somewhat understated eschatological dimension of Sri Ramakrishna’s own theodicy. According to Hick, the traditional Christian belief in hell—a place of eternal punishment for unredeemed souls—is fatal to theodicy:

For the doctrine of hell has as its implied premise either that God does not desire to save all His human creatures, in which case He is only limitedly good, or that His purpose has finally failed in the case of some—and indeed, according to the theological tradition, most—of them, in which case He is only limitedly sovereign. I therefore believe that the needs of Christian theodicy compel us to repudiate the idea of eternal punishment.<sup>48</sup>

On the one hand, God is not perfectly good if He does not “desire to save all His human creatures”; on the other hand, God is not perfectly omnipotent if He *does*

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47. Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 351.

48. Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 342.

desire to save everyone but is unable to do so. Since the doctrine of hell implies one of these two premises, it undermines not only theodicy but theism in general. On these grounds, Hick rejects the doctrine of hell in favor of “universalism,” the doctrine that every soul will eventually be saved.<sup>49</sup> For Hick, only the “infinite good” of salvation “would render worth while *any* finite suffering endured in the course of attaining it.”<sup>50</sup> Hence, the doctrine of universal salvation is essential to theodicy: all the evil and suffering in the world are outweighed by the infinite good of salvation that awaits us all.

As I argued in the previous chapter, Sri Ramakrishna not only shares Hick’s belief in universal salvation but also repeatedly appeals to the doctrine of universal salvation in the specific context of theodicy. In the course of elaborating his saint-making theodicy, Sri Ramakrishna affirms that “[e]verybody will surely be liberated” (*K* 36–37 / *G* 97–98). Similarly, in his response to Nanda’s question about evil, Sri Ramakrishna appeals to the panentheistic standpoint of *viññāna* and then immediately adds that “[a]ll will be liberated” (*K* 879 / *G* 818). Hick’s convincing argument for the theodical necessity of universalism lends strong support to Sri Ramakrishna’s own appeal to universal salvation. The various finite evils of this world do not call into question God’s love, because these evils are a necessary part of the soul’s arduous journey toward the infinite good of liberation, which He has lovingly ordained for us all. For both Sri Ramakrishna and Hick, then, theodicy is ultimately forward-looking: we can all look forward to the infinite reward of eternal salvation, which will redeem all the suffering we have endured in our journey toward God.

### III. A Ramakrishnan Critique of Hick’s Soul-Making Theodicy

In the previous section, I drew upon several of Hick’s theodical arguments in order to develop and strengthen the saint-making and eschatological dimensions of Sri Ramakrishna’s own theodicy. In this section, I turn the tables on Hick by critically examining his soul-making theodicy from the standpoint of Sri Ramakrishna.

As we have seen in section III of the previous chapter, the doctrines of *karma* and rebirth play a crucial role in Sri Ramakrishna’s saint-making theodicy. Since we experience happiness and suffering in accordance with the law of *karma*, we should not blame God for the moral evil we observe in the world. According to

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49. Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 341–45.

50. Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 341.

Sri Ramakrishna, through numerous experiences in the course of many lives, we gradually learn to overcome our selfish tendencies and to cultivate virtuous qualities such as compassion, dispassion toward sense-pleasures, and devotion to God, until finally—in our last birth—we realize God and achieve liberation.

Hick, by contrast, presupposes a traditional Christian one-life-only paradigm, so the doctrines of *karma* and rebirth are absent from his soul-making theodicy. However, numerous scholars have contended that Hick's adoption of a one-life-only paradigm makes his soul-making theodicy vulnerable to serious objections.<sup>51</sup> Building on the work of these scholars, I will argue that there are four major weaknesses in Hick's soul-making theodicy, which stem from his assumption of a one-life-only paradigm and his failure to consider the theodical implications of mystical experience. On this basis, I will make the case that Sri Ramakrishna's mystically grounded saint-making theodicy is more plausible and consistent than Hick's theodicy.

First, the very fact that so many people do not seem to make any appreciable progress in their soul-making journey in this all too brief life calls into question the plausibility of Hick's soul-making hypothesis. Indeed, Hick himself admits that "so far as we can see, the soul-making process does in fact fail in our own world at least as often as it succeeds."<sup>52</sup> If God created this world as a soul-making environment, why didn't He do a better job? The soul-making process seems to be thwarted in the case of countless people, such as infants or children who die of incurable diseases, innocent victims of murder, and people who are killed in natural calamities such as earthquakes and floods.

In response to this problem, Hick argues that the soul-making process continues in the afterlife. Specifically, Hick hypothesizes that after death, we enter an "intermediate state" of purgatory in which our "self-centredness is gradually broken through by a 'godly sorrow.'"<sup>53</sup> The extent and duration of this intermediate state differ from person to person, depending on "the degree of sanctification" achieved at the time of death.<sup>54</sup> For instance, since the soul-making process is tragically cut short in the case of many children who die in infancy, these

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51. See, for instance, Arthur Herman, *The Problem of Evil and Indian Thought* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1976), 287–88; Michael McDonald, "Towards a Contemporary Theodicy: Based on Critical Review of John Hick, David Griffin and Sri Aurobindo" (Ph.D. diss., University of Hawaii, 1995), 22–30; Michael Stoeber, *Evil and the Mystics' God: Towards a Mystical Theodicy* (London: Macmillan, 1992), 167–87.

52. Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 336.

53. Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 346–47.

54. Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 347.

children would likely remain in the postmortem state of purgatory for a considerable amount of time in order to achieve complete sanctification.

Hence, in order to save the plausibility and coherence of his soul-making hypothesis, Hick is compelled to place an enormous explanatory burden on the hypothesis of a postmortem state of purgatory. However, since the existence of such a postmortem state is highly questionable, Hick is open to the charge that one of the central aspects of his soul-making theodicy remains entirely speculative.<sup>55</sup> How do we know that such an intermediate state really exists? Indeed, one might even argue that Hick's appeal to a postmortem state of purgatory is an ad hoc strategy to account for the many instances of people whose soul-making process was cut short in this life. Moreover, even if there *is* a postmortem purgatorial state in which the soul-making process is completed, Hick still has to prove that God created *this* (pre-postmortem) world as an environment conducive to soul-making.

From Sri Ramakrishna's perspective, Hick's assumption of a one-life-only paradigm necessitates his appeal to an extended state of purgatory after death. Since Sri Ramakrishna accepts the doctrines of *karma* and rebirth, he is able to maintain that the primary soul-making environment is *this* world rather than a hypothetical postmortem state of purgatory. In each life, we make a certain amount of progress in our spiritual journey toward saintliness, and we are reborn in this world again and again until the saint-making process is complete. Therefore, Sri Ramakrishna's saint-making theodicy is far better equipped than Hick's theodicy to handle difficult cases such as that of an infant who dies from a painful disease. Sri Ramakrishna could explain this case as follows: the infant's suffering and death played an integral role in her soul's spiritual journey by helping to exhaust her unwholesome *karma* from a previous birth, and the infant's soul will take on new bodies here on earth in order to continue the saint-making process until it achieves final liberation.

Second, both Michael Stoeber and Michael McDonald have made a convincing case that Hick's total neglect of mystical experience weakens the force of his soul-making theodicy. As McDonald puts it, "If Hick emphasized mystical experience more, he would avoid an implication that outrages many of his critics—the implication that one must wait for the post-death future situation to find out whether evil is ultimately justified, or whether the other things Hick

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55. One might point out that Sri Ramakrishna's saint-making theodicy presupposes rebirth, which also does not admit of empirical verification. However, as I discussed in the final section of chapter 7, Sri Ramakrishna claimed to have mystical knowledge of the past lives of himself and others. Stoeber convincingly argues that this mystical confirmation of rebirth is one of the major advantages of mystical theodicies over Hick's theodicy (*Evil and the Mystics' God*, 184). See also my brief discussion of the question of the empirical verifiability of rebirth in section IV of this chapter.



says are true.”<sup>56</sup> That is, the truth of Hick’s soul-making theodicy can only be verified in a postmortem state, since nothing in our experience here on earth provides sufficient evidence that evil and suffering serve the purpose of soul-making. However, Stoeber argues that some of the mystical experiences of saints such as Meister Eckhart and Pseudo-Dionysius *do* directly attest to God’s soul-making purposes and His loving nature and, hence, have considerable theodical force. As Stoeber puts it, “Hick can only point vaguely to a future eschatological experience to justify his view. Mystical theodicies, on the other hand, claim possible verification here and now, a mystical experience of God’s purposes.”<sup>57</sup>

Stoeber’s argument equally supports Sri Ramakrishna’s mystically grounded theodicy. As we saw in sections V and VI of the previous chapter, Sri Ramakrishna enjoyed numerous theodically significant mystical experiences, including the knowledge of the past lives of himself and others, the experience of God as the compassionate Divine Mother, the Advaitic experience of the transcendental Ātman untouched by evil and suffering, and the panentheistic experience of *vijñāna*. If we grant even a little evidential weight to these mystical experiences—as I argue in chapter 6 that we should—then Sri Ramakrishna’s saint-making theodicy, which is grounded in his own confirmatory mystical experiences, has a significant advantage over Hick’s nonmystical theodicy.

Third, toward the end of his book, Hick acknowledges the limits of his soul-making theodicy when he admits that God has “ultimate responsibility for the existence of evil,” since He chose to create the world as a soul-making environment in which evil is inevitable.<sup>58</sup> While conceding God’s “omni-responsibility”<sup>59</sup> for evil, Hick argues that his theodicy succeeds in showing that God is nonetheless justified in creating this world, since it is only in such a world that “creatures made as personal in the ‘image’ of God may be brought through their own free responses towards the finite ‘likeness’ of God.”<sup>60</sup> This explanation, however, fails to provide a convincing answer to a fundamental question: why did God choose to create the world as a soul-making environment in the first place if He knew that such a world would contain so much evil and suffering? The best response Hick can give is that only such a soul-making environment would allow God’s creatures to come to Him freely. But is human freedom a sufficiently valuable intrinsic good to justify all the evil and suffering that it entails? Since Hick does

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56. McDonald, “Towards a Contemporary Theodicy,” 45. Stoeber makes a similar criticism of Hick’s theodicy in *Evil and the Mystics’ God*, 4.

57. Stoeber, *Evil and the Mystics’ God*, 4.

58. Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 238.

59. Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 236.

60. Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 238.

not justify adequately an affirmative answer to this question, his soul-making theodicy remains incomplete.

In contrast to Hick, Sri Ramakrishna maintains that God created the world as a saint-making environment in a spirit of sportive play (*līlā*). However, as we saw in the previous chapter, Sri Ramakrishna's theodical appeal to *līlā* is vulnerable to a serious objection akin to the one raised by Hick's theodicy: why didn't God create a better *līlā* with less evil and suffering? Indeed, in the dialogue between Sri Ramakrishna and Hari quoted in the previous chapter, Hari raises precisely this objection: "But God's *līlā* is our death" (*K* 437 / *G* 436). Significantly, Sri Ramakrishna responds to Hari's objection by appealing to the mystical standpoint of *viśvānā*: since God Himself has become everything and everyone in the universe, the underlying presupposition of the problem of evil—namely, that there is a difference between God and His creatures—is false. Accordingly, Sri Ramakrishna's saint-making theodicy is completed by, and finds its ultimate justification in, a mystically grounded panentheistic metaphysics, which dissolves the problem of evil by denying the very presupposition at its basis. In stark contrast to Sri Ramakrishna, Hick not only neglects mystical experience altogether but also presents his soul-making hypothesis as a stand-alone theodicy. Hence, Hick is unable to provide a fully satisfactory answer to the question of why God created the world as a soul-making environment in the first place.

Fourth, scholars such as Arthur Herman have argued that the single most serious problem for Hick's soul-making theodicy is its inability to account for what Hick calls "dysteleological" suffering—that is, suffering that does not serve the purpose of soul-making. Hick mentions numerous examples of dysteleological suffering, including mass famines from which millions perish and a child who dies of cerebral meningitis.<sup>61</sup> Hick summarizes the problem of dysteleological suffering as follows: "The problem consists . . . in the fact that instead of serving a constructive purpose pain and misery seem to be distributed in random and meaningless ways, with the result that suffering is often undeserved and often falls upon men in amounts exceeding anything that could be rationally intended."<sup>62</sup> In response to this formidable problem of dysteleological suffering, Hick admits that the "only appeal left is to mystery."<sup>63</sup> By appealing to mystery, Hick seems to concede that some suffering *is* in fact dysteleological and hence does not serve the purpose of soul-making.

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61. Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 330.

62. Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 333.

63. Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 333–34.

Confusingly, however, Hick also attempts to justify his appeal to mystery by employing the “method of counter-factual hypothesis.”<sup>64</sup> Hick imagines a world in which no suffering is dysteleological since all cases of suffering are either “justly deserved punishments” or “serve a constructive purpose of moral training.”<sup>65</sup> In such a world, “virtuous action would be immediately rewarded with happiness, and wicked action with misery.”<sup>66</sup> According to Hick, there would be no possibility of compassion or “self-giving for others” in such a world, since the compassionate alleviation of others’ suffering presupposes “that the suffering is not deserved and that it is *bad* for the sufferer.”<sup>67</sup> Moreover, Hick argues that in such an imagined world, there would be no possibility of doing the right action “simply *because* it is right and without any expectation of reward.”<sup>68</sup> Hick reasons as follows: “For whilst the possibility of the good will by no means precludes that right action shall in fact eventually lead to happiness, and wrong action to misery, it does preclude this happening so certainly, instantly, and manifestly that virtue cannot be separated in experience and thought from its reward, or vice from its punishment.”<sup>69</sup> Truly ethical action, Hick argues, requires that the reward for virtuous action and the punishment for vicious action are not immediately manifest to us. On the basis of this counterfactual argument, Hick concludes that “suffering must fall upon mankind with something of the haphazardness and inequity that we now experience.”<sup>70</sup>

However, there are some serious problems with Hick’s attempt to explain the “mystery” of dysteleological suffering by means of this counterfactual argument. Most fundamentally, he commits a blatant contradiction. On the one hand, Hick claims that dysteleological suffering is a brute mystery that cannot be explained “in any rational or ethical way.”<sup>71</sup> That is, Hick admits that certain instances of suffering really are dysteleological and hence do not admit of rational explanation. On the other hand, he provides a rational counterfactual argument that aims to show that even those instances of suffering that *appear* to be dysteleological are *not* actually dysteleological, since they contribute to God’s cosmic purpose of soul-making by eliciting in people “compassionate love” and

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64. Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 334.

65. Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 334.

66. Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 335.

67. Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 334.

68. Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 335.

69. Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 335.

70. Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 334.

71. Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 333.

“self-giving.”<sup>72</sup> Hence, Hick’s response to the problem of dysteleological suffering is contradictory.

Moreover, Hick’s counterfactual argument itself is flawed because it presupposes that the only possible alternative to the world as it exists—in which suffering is often undeserved and randomly distributed—is a world in which “virtuous action” is “immediately rewarded with happiness” and “wicked action with misery.”<sup>73</sup> As a result of his Christian assumption of a one-life-only paradigm, Hick fails to consider a third possibility—namely, an Indian worldview based on the theory of *karma* and rebirth. According to the Indian theory, while all suffering *is* typically apportioned to individual desert, the fruits of virtuous and evil actions are often not immediate or apparent to others, both because the workings of the law of *karma* are mysterious to us and because the fruits of *karma* may only accrue much later in life or in a future life. Arguably, then, a worldview based on *karma* and rebirth accommodates the possibility of compassionate and charitable behavior toward others without requiring the existence of any dysteleological suffering. Since Hick overlooks the possibility of a worldview based on *karma* and rebirth, his counterfactual argument fails to establish that compassionate action would be impossible in a world devoid of dysteleological evil.

One might argue, however, that Hick’s counterfactual argument could easily be modified to disprove the Indian theory of *karma* as well. Whitley Kaufman presents an argument along these lines:

It [the *karma* theory] entails that there is no such thing as innocent suffering, that everyone gets just what he deserves. But then there can be no moral obligation to help others in distress, to protect, to rescue, perform acts of charity, or even to feel compassion for a sufferer. Most other theodicies begin with the acceptance that there is such a thing as innocent suffering, that as humans we do not have godlike control of our destiny, but are fragile, vulnerable beings, often in need of help from others. The implication is a deep moral obligation to help those in need, to feel compassion and pity for those in pain. In contrast, *karma* elevates the “blame the victim” idea into a systematic principle.<sup>74</sup>

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72. Herman identifies a similar contradiction in Hick’s argument in *The Problem of Evil and Indian Thought*, 76.

73. Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 335.

74. Whitley Kaufman, “Karma, Rebirth, and the Problem of Evil: A Reply to Critics,” *Philosophy East and West* 57.4 (October 2007), 559.

According to Kaufman, in a world governed by the law of *karma*, people would refrain from performing acts of charity or feeling “compassion for a sufferer” because they would assume that the sufferer’s pain is, after all, deserved. Hence, like Hick, Kaufman argues that compassionate action is only possible in a world in which there is “innocent” or undeserved suffering.

However, Arvind Sharma rightly points out that Kaufman overlooks the fact that the doctrine of *karma* encompasses the dimensions of both fact and value. As he puts it, “the doctrine of karma and rebirth accepts the individual responsibility of the sufferer as a fact but promotes the value of helping those who suffer as part and parcel of the value system associated with the doctrine.”<sup>75</sup> Far from promoting a “blame the victim” mentality, the doctrine of *karma* maintains that we accrue good *karma* by engaging in compassionate action and accrue bad *karma* by ignoring the suffering of others and living a self-centered existence. Sharma provides an apt analogy to illustrate this point. Just as a doctor treats a lung cancer patient even though the doctor knows that the patient’s own lifelong habit of chain-smoking was the cause of his cancer, we have an ethical obligation to alleviate the suffering of others, even if we know that all suffering is governed by the law of *karma*. Kaufman is wrong, then, to assume that “innocent suffering” alone elicits genuine “compassion and pity.” As Sharma puts it, “*One need not be an innocent victim to be helped—it is enough for one to be a victim to qualify for help in terms of the doctrine of karma and rebirth.*”<sup>76</sup>

It would take us too far afield to pursue any further this debate on the ethical implications of the doctrines of *karma* and rebirth.<sup>77</sup> However, I hope to have shown that Hick’s counterfactual argument for the necessity of dysteleological evil is seriously flawed because it fails to consider the possibility of a world governed by the law of *karma*. Indeed, Herman argues that the greatest stumbling block for all Western theodicies is the problem of dysteleological or “extraordinary” evil.<sup>78</sup> Rejecting Hick’s appeal to mystery as an unjustified move, Herman claims that the Indian doctrines of *karma* and rebirth provide the only satisfactory resolution of the problem of dysteleological evil. As Herman puts it, “Thus no matter how terrible and awe-inspiring the suffering may be, the rebirth theorist

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75. Arvind Sharma, “Karma, Rebirth, and the Problem of Evil: An Interjection in the Debate between Whitley Kaufman and Monima Chadha and Nick Trakakis,” *Philosophy East and West* 58.4 (October 2008), 573.

76. Sharma, “Karma, Rebirth, and the Problem of Evil,” 573.

77. Ankur Barua provides a helpful discussion of the metaphysical assumptions underlying the debate about *karma* and theodicy between Kaufman on the one hand and Monima Chadha, Nick Trakakis, and Sharma on the other. See Ankur Barua, “The Reality and the Verifiability of Reincarnation,” *Religions* 8.9 (September 2017), 1–13.

78. Herman, *The Problem of Evil and Indian Thought*, 287.

can simply attribute the suffering to previous misdeeds done in previous lives, and the puzzle over extraordinary evil is solved with no harm done to the majesty and holiness of Deity.”<sup>79</sup> On the Indian view, then, no suffering is truly dysteleological, since all suffering is governed by the law of *karma*. Herman further points out that Indian *karma*-based theodicies are even stronger when combined with the doctrine of universal salvation. As he puts it, “Evil emerges as purposive, designed by me, caused by me, and ultimately leading all out of *samsara*.”<sup>80</sup>

Herman’s arguments help pinpoint some of the key advantages of Sri Ramakrishna’s *karma*-based saint-making theodicy. According to Sri Ramakrishna, all suffering is not only governed by the law of *karma* but also serves God’s cosmic purpose of leading *all* His creatures to the spiritual goal of liberation. Since Sri Ramakrishna subscribes to the doctrine of *karma*, dysteleological evil does not pose a problem for his theodicy. For Sri Ramakrishna, there *is* no strictly dysteleological suffering, since even the most extreme cases of suffering are governed by *karma* and contribute to God’s cosmic purpose of saint-making. Hick, by contrast, is compelled to accept the existence of dysteleological evil but lands in philosophical difficulties when he tries to account for its existence within the parameters of his saint-making theodicy.

In sum, then, Sri Ramakrishna’s saint-making theodicy shares many of the advantages of Hick’s soul-making theodicy but lacks some of its major weaknesses, which stem from Hick’s assumption of a one-life-only paradigm and his neglect of mystical experience. Since Sri Ramakrishna accepts the doctrines of *karma* and rebirth and grounds his theodicy in his own varied mystical experiences, he is in a far better position than Hick not only to explain how this world serves as an optimal environment for saint-making but also to justify some of the central tenets of his theodicy.

#### IV. Toward a Metatheodicy: Adequacy Criteria for Assessing Theodicies

Numerous recent theologians and philosophers have called for a cross-cultural approach to theodicy. Mark S. M. Scott, for instance, affirms that “Christian theodicy should invite dialogue with other religious traditions, for their mutual enrichment.”<sup>81</sup> Similarly, Francis X. Clooney has called for a “comparative theodicy,” which he defines as “the construction of a broad, cross-cultural and cross-religious

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79. Herman, *The Problem of Evil and Indian Thought*, 287–88.

80. Herman, *The Problem of Evil and Indian Thought*, 289.

81. Mark S. M. Scott, *Pathways in Theodicy: An Introduction to the Problem of Evil* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 213–14.

set of theodicies that support and refine one another on the one hand, and, on the other, reveal and deconstruct unquestioned sets of presuppositions about evil and what counts in explanations of it.”<sup>82</sup> While Clooney’s understanding of comparative theodicy is nuanced and compelling, I think the term “comparative” is potentially misleading, since it might imply the mere comparison of static theodical structures. I would suggest that “cross-cultural theodicy” better captures the dynamic, and dialectical, interaction among theodicies Clooney envisions. Sections II and III of this chapter have contributed to this nascent cross-cultural endeavor by bringing the theodicies of Hick and Sri Ramakrishna into dialectical confrontation. Their theodicies, as we have seen, not only mutually illuminate and enrich each other but also bring to light the metaphysical and theological presuppositions underlying Hick’s and Sri Ramakrishna’s respective approaches to the problem of evil.

I will conclude this chapter by addressing in preliminary fashion an important methodological issue raised by the project of cross-cultural theodicy. In order to bring theodicies across cultures into fruitful dialogue, we have to venture into what Nick Trakakis calls “meta-theodicy,” the project of determining “adequacy conditions” for theodicies.<sup>83</sup> Establishing these adequacy conditions would provide a sound methodological foundation for cross-cultural discourse on theodicy. Since a full-blown metatheodicy is beyond the scope of this chapter, I will only lay some of the groundwork for future cross-cultural work by outlining what I take to be the four most important adequacy criteria for assessing theodicies: AC1, internal consistency; AC2, comprehensiveness; AC3, success; and AC4, plausibility.

AC1 requires us to ask: are the various tenets of a given theodicy consistent with one another?<sup>84</sup> In section III, I argued that there is a tension in Hick’s soul-making theodicy between his thesis that God created this world as an environment for soul-making and his hypothesis of a postmortem state of purgatory. In order to account for the fact that many people do not seem to make significant progress in their soul-making journey in this world, Hick claims that these people continue the soul-making process in a postmortem state. The problem is that Hick places such an enormous explanatory burden on this hypothesis of a postmortem purgatory that he undermines his own central theodical claim that

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82. Francis X. Clooney, “Evil, Divine Omnipotence, and Human Freedom: Vedānta’s Theology of Karma,” *Journal of Religion* 69.4 (October 1989), 548.

83. Nick Trakakis, *The God beyond Belief: In Defence of William Rowe’s Evidential Argument from Evil* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007), 227–50.

84. Both Trakakis and Eleonore Stump propose the criterion of internal consistency. See Trakakis, *The God beyond Belief*, 238, and Stump, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 452.



*this* world is the primary arena for soul-making. Arguably, then, Hick's soul-making theodicy does not fare well on AC1, since the tension I have identified reflects an internal inconsistency in his theory.

Assessing how well Sri Ramakrishna's theodicy fares on AC1 is complicated by the fact that there are so many different elements in his response to the problem of evil. For instance, one can ask whether Sri Ramakrishna's theodicy is consistent with his skeptical theist position. Anticipating this important question, I argued in section III of the previous chapter that Sri Ramakrishna's skeptical theism and his saint-making theodicy are, in fact, complementary strategies for responding to the problem of evil. One might also ask whether Sri Ramakrishna's saint-making theodicy is consistent with his hard theological determinism. Doesn't Sri Ramakrishna's denial of free will undermine his theodical claim that God permits evil in order to motivate us to cultivate saintly qualities that will bring us closer to God? In section IV of chapter 7, I contended that this inconsistency is only apparent, since Sri Ramakrishna maintains that people who have not yet realized God have the illusion of free will, which makes them feel morally responsible for their actions. This feeling of moral responsibility, together with the telos of universal salvation, make the saint-making process valuable in spite of the truth of hard theological determinism.

Overall, then, assessing how well the theodicies of Sri Ramakrishna and Hick fare on AC1 is a complicated issue that depends on how we interpret their views. One might make the case that Hick's acceptance of free will puts him in a better position than Sri Ramakrishna to develop an internally consistent theodicy. Conversely, one could argue, as I have done, that Sri Ramakrishna's acceptance of the doctrines of *karma* and rebirth puts him in a better position than Hick to explain how this world serves as the primary environment for soul-making.

AC2 asks whether a given theodicy is able to provide a comprehensive explanation of *all* instances of natural and moral evil in the world. If my criticisms of Hick's theodicy in the previous section are sound, then Sri Ramakrishna's theodicy fares much better than Hick's on AC2, since Sri Ramakrishna accepts the doctrines of *karma* and rebirth. Hick, as we have seen, is forced to concede that his soul-making theodicy is unable to explain certain cases of dysteleological suffering, such as a child who dies painfully of cerebral meningitis. For Sri Ramakrishna, by contrast, no suffering is dysteleological, since our suffering is always governed by the law of *karma*, and this suffering serves God's cosmic purpose of leading us, in the course of many lives, to the goal of eternal salvation. Therefore, Sri Ramakrishna's *karma*-based theodicy accounts for a greater range of evils than Hick's theodicy.

AC3 asks whether a given theodicy succeeds in showing that the goods obtained through a given instance of evil really outweigh that evil itself.<sup>85</sup> The

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85. Trakakis and Dewey Hoytenga emphasize this criterion. See Trakakis, *The God beyond Belief*,

goods proposed by Sri Ramakrishna and Hick are similar: the cultivation of ethical and spiritual qualities, leading to the infinite good of eternal salvation that awaits us all. One might argue, against *both* Hick and Sri Ramakrishna, that the good of soul-making or saint-making does not, in fact, outweigh the evils necessary to bring about that good. However, it is important to recognize that their theodicies presuppose an eschatology of universal salvation. For Sri Ramakrishna and Hick, soul-making has infinitely great value precisely because it is necessary for attaining the infinite good of our eternal salvation. On AC3, then, the theodicies of Sri Ramakrishna and Hick seem to me to fare equally well.

Finally, AC4 asks how plausible a given theodicy is. How likely is it that a theodicy is true? According to Stump, this criterion requires us to assess whether a theodicy is consistent with “uncontested empirical evidence.”<sup>86</sup> Similarly, Trakakis argues that a theodicy must not conflict with “certain background information,” such as evolutionary theory.<sup>87</sup> Of course, everything depends on what evidence or information we take to be “uncontested.” Since there is overwhelming evidence for evolution, a theodicy that presupposes that God created the universe several thousand years ago would clearly be implausible. However, there are other theodical doctrines that are much trickier to assess. For instance, a scientific naturalist might claim that there is clear evidence that there is no afterlife. As Stump points out, however, “no one has given even a remotely plausible argument, let alone a demonstration, to show the falsity of the claim that there is an afterlife in which some human beings are unendingly united to God.”<sup>88</sup> Stump seems to me to be right about this, although I cannot defend her view here. In any case, it is far from easy to show that theodicies that presuppose an afterlife—such as Sri Ramakrishna’s, Hick’s, and Stump’s own—conflict with undisputed empirical data.

It is equally difficult to demonstrate that the metaphysical doctrines presupposed by Sri Ramakrishna—such as the doctrines of *karma* and rebirth—conflict with empirical evidence. Indeed, some researchers have claimed that there is strong empirical evidence in *favor* of rebirth.<sup>89</sup> For instance, according to Ian

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233–36, and Hoitenga, “Logic and the Problem of Evil,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 4.2 (April 1967), 115.

86. Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, 452.

87. Trakakis, *The God beyond Belief*, 243.

88. Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, 390.

89. See, for instance, Jim Tucker, *Return to Life: Extraordinary Cases of Children Who Remember Past Lives* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2015), as well as Ian Stevenson’s major studies, *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1974), and *Reincarnation and Biology: A Contribution to the Etiology of Birthmarks and Birth Defects* (Westport: Praeger, 1997).

Stevenson, there are numerous people who have made empirically verifiable claims about their past lives. It seems to me, however, that scientific research on reincarnation has not yet advanced to the point where such empirical evidence can be considered uncontested.<sup>90</sup> Nonetheless, it seems eminently reasonable to hold the more modest view that the doctrines of *karma* and rebirth are, at least, *not inconsistent* with uncontested empirical data. Therefore, the fact that Sri Ramakrishna's theodicy presupposes these doctrines does not make it any less plausible than Hick's theodicy, which is, of course, committed to various controversial metaphysical doctrines in its own right, such as a postmortem state of purgatory.

Moreover, as we have seen, Sri Ramakrishna's theodicy is based on his own mystical experiences: the panentheistic experience of *vijñāna*, the Advaitic experience of the Ātman, the mystical knowledge of his own past lives as well as those of others, and so on. If we grant some degree of evidential value to these mystical experiences, then other things being equal, Sri Ramakrishna's mystically grounded theodicy has greater plausibility than Hick's nonmystical theodicy.

While a great deal more can be said about the various criteria for comparing and assessing theodicies, this section has laid some of the metatheological groundwork for cross-cultural inquiry into the problem of evil. The time has come for theologians and philosophers to enrich their understanding of the range of theological possibilities by considering approaches to the problem of evil in a variety of religious traditions. We need not fear that a cross-cultural approach to theodicy may undermine or weaken our commitment to our own religious tradition. In fact, I hope to have shown that we can strengthen and deepen our own religious commitments by bringing the theodicies of our particular faith tradition into creative, and mutually beneficial, dialogue with theodicies of other religions and cultures.

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90. On this point, I agree with Hick, who claims that the evidence for reincarnation is not yet conclusive. See Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1989), 369. Barua also discusses the question of the empirical verifiability of reincarnation in "The Reality and the Verifiability of Reincarnation" (9–12). Barua concludes, I think rightly, that "the belief in karma and reincarnation is densely intertwined with various psychological, metaphysical, and eschatological themes, so that different individuals, depending on whether or not they inhabit specific worldviews, will differ in their evaluations of the 'evidence' that is being presented for the belief" (12).



## METHODOLOGICAL POSTLUDE

In a provocative editorial published in the *New York Times* in May 2016, Jay Garfield and Bryan Van Norden argued that philosophy departments which regularly offer courses only in Western philosophy have an intellectual and ethical obligation either to diversify their curriculum by including non-Western philosophical traditions or, less desirably, to rename themselves “Departments of European and American Philosophy.”<sup>1</sup> Not surprisingly, the article provoked heated debate, particularly on Brian Leiter’s popular philosophy blog.<sup>2</sup> Leiter made his own stance abundantly clear by accusing Garfield and Van Norden of playing the “diversity card.” According to Leiter, Anglo-American philosophy departments are dominated by an analytic “*style of doing philosophy*” that has resulted in the neglect not only of non-Western philosophies but also of nonanalytic Western philosophy.<sup>3</sup> In the ensuing thread to Leiter’s blog post, Jonardon Ganeri made a brief but devastating rebuttal to Leiter that got overlooked, unfortunately, in the cacophony of shriller voices: “It has been well known for several decades that much philosophy written in Sanskrit is highly analytical in style (one need only consult B. K. Matilal’s *The Doctrine of Negation in Navya-Nyāya* to see this). So the argument from style itself favours a diversification of the curriculum and the canon.”<sup>4</sup> Leiter’s mistake, Ganeri points out, is to assume that all

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1. Jay Garfield and Bryan W. Van Norden, “If Philosophy Won’t Diversify, Let’s Call It What It Really Is,” *New York Times*, 11 May 2016. Van Norden has recently expanded this article into the book, *Taking Back Philosophy: A Multicultural Manifesto* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

2. Brian Leiter, “Anglophone Departments Aren’t ‘Departments of European and American Philosophy,’” *Leiter Reports* (blog), 11 May 2016 (8:01 a.m.) (<http://leiter-reports.typepad.com/blog/2016/05/anglophone-departments-arent-departments-of-european-and-american-philosophy.html>).

3. Leiter, “Anglophone Departments Aren’t ‘Departments of European and American Philosophy.’”

4. See Jonardon Ganeri’s comment #25 at 6:52 p.m. in response to Leiter’s blog post, “Anglophone Departments Aren’t ‘Departments of European and American Philosophy.’”

non-Western philosophies are nonanalytic in style and have little or nothing to contribute to analytic discussions.

In the spirit of Ganeri's observation, this book has demonstrated the relevance of Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical positions and arguments to contemporary debates in analytic philosophy of religion. However, as Amy Olberding has persuasively argued in a recent essay, it is not enough for cross-cultural philosophers to demonstrate how non-Western philosophies can benefit and enrich mainstream Western philosophical conversations. Indeed, Olberding astutely diagnoses, and interrogates, the "servile" attitude that often underlies such a "handmaiden" approach to non-Western philosophy:

The phenomenon that [Eric] Schliesser describes as servility concerns how members of outlier intellectual territories may seek entry points into the "mainstream" or "core" by commending the utility of their work to those resident and working in the more prominent and prestigious areas. Inhabitants of deviant areas of philosophy may in effect promote responses such as [David] Chalmers', articulating for "mainstream" peers how deviant work can profit conversations happening within the "core." That this is a servile posture is evidenced by the absence of mutuality and reciprocity: Such conversations about utility rarely extend into addressing how the "mainstream" might assist the deviant. So the risk here is that outliers working in deviant areas are positioned—indeed *position themselves*—akin to "research assistants" aiding others in the "grand project" of philosophy, a project presumably well under way without them.<sup>5</sup>

Olberding should not be misunderstood. She is not claiming that the very project of demonstrating the relevance of non-Western philosophies to the analytic "grand project" is fundamentally servile and, therefore, should be rejected altogether. In fact, Olberding admits that her own work sometimes involves showing how Chinese philosophy serves as "occasional handmaiden in sorting out existing 'mainstream' problems."<sup>6</sup> I take Olberding's point to be, rather, that we risk becoming servile when we conceive cross-cultural philosophy *exclusively* or *primarily* as the project of showing how non-Western philosophies can benefit mainstream analytic conversations. She also helpfully indicates two ways that cross-cultural philosophers can avoid this servile posture. First, she emphasizes

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5. Amy Olberding, "Reply to Schliesser," *Philosophy East and West* 67.4 (October 2017), 1045. As this passage indicates, Olberding develops the concept of "servility" first introduced by Eric Schliesser in a different context.

6. Olberding, "Reply to Schliesser," 1045.

the need for “mutuality and reciprocity.”<sup>7</sup> That is, we should strive to show not only how non-Western philosophies can benefit mainstream philosophical discussions but also how mainstream philosophy can enrich and deepen our understanding of non-Western philosophies. Second, instead of allowing mainstream philosophy to dictate the terms and boundaries within which philosophical debates and problems are framed, we should explore how non-Western traditions introduce “myriad ‘new’ problems, perspectives, and priorities.”<sup>8</sup>

Throughout this book, I have adopted a flexible and reciprocal cross-cultural methodology that strives to avoid the danger of servility. To what extent I have succeeded in this endeavor is for readers to judge. In my view, the best way for cross-cultural philosophers to avoid servility is to adopt a problem-oriented approach that focuses on issues, problems, and debates raised in *both* Western and non-Western philosophical traditions. While I have shown how Sri Ramakrishna’s philosophical perspective sheds new light on debates in contemporary philosophy of religion, I have also drawn on the conceptual resources of mainstream analytic philosophy in order to illuminate and strengthen Sri Ramakrishna’s own views and arguments. More fundamentally, I have argued that Sri Ramakrishna’s unique mystico-philosophical perspective not only challenges some of the fundamental presuppositions of recent Western philosophy of religion and theology but also provides entirely new strategies for addressing, and potentially resolving, cross-cultural philosophical problems.

B. K. Matilal did more than anyone to debunk the stereotype that all Indian philosophy is “mystical,” dogmatic, or otherworldly by highlighting the sophisticated and rigorous arguments found in the Indian philosophical traditions of Nyāya and Navya-Nyāya. At the same time, however, Matilal did not ignore the mystical strands of Indian philosophy. Indeed, an important aspect of his cross-cultural project was to demonstrate that mystically inclined Indian philosophers such as Nāgārjuna and Śrī Harṣa made extensive use of logical arguments to “illuminate the mystical instead of deepening its mystery.”<sup>9</sup> Some of the best contemporary scholars working on Indian philosophy have followed Matilal in analyzing the arguments of Nyāya and Navya-Nyāya and showing their relevance to contemporary analytic philosophy.<sup>10</sup>

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7. Olberding, “Reply to Schliesser,” 1045.

8. Olberding, “Reply to Schliesser,” 1045.

9. B. K. Matilal, “The Logical Illumination of Indian Mysticism,” in *The Collected Essays of Bimal Krishna Matilal: Mind, Language and World*, ed. Jonardon Ganeri (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 53–54. See also Matilal’s four other essays concerning Indian mysticism in Part I of the same collection.

10. See, for instance, Jonardon Ganeri, *The Lost Age of Reason: Philosophy in Early Modern India, 1450–1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Stephen Phillips, *Classical*



My book can be seen as an attempt to revive the other, relatively neglected, strand of Matilal's project, which aims to demonstrate the rigor and contemporary relevance of the work of India's philosopher-mystics.<sup>11</sup> In the spirit of Matilal, I have militated against the facile assumption that mystical philosophies are more dogmatic than rational. Sri Ramakrishna, as we have seen, made subtle use of philosophical argumentation and logical reasoning to defend his mystically grounded worldview. At the same time, I have shown that his mystical orientation was the precondition for many of his most original and significant philosophical insights.

Of course, this book is by no means the last word on Sri Ramakrishna's philosophy. In each chapter of the book, I have indicated some of the ways that my arguments can be further developed or extended—for instance, by bringing Sri Ramakrishna into dialogue with Indian and Western philosophers not discussed here, or by considering further objections to Sri Ramakrishna's philosophical positions that I could not address due to lack of space. My hope is that this book will inspire philosophers and theologians across the world to engage with Sri Ramakrishna as a valuable interlocutor who can offer fresh and insightful perspectives on a variety of philosophical problems.

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*Indian Metaphysics: Refutations of Realism and the Emergence of New Logic* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1997); Arindam Chakrabarti, ed., *Epistemology, Meaning and Metaphysics after Matilal* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1996).

11. Stephen Phillips, it should be noted, has done important work not only on Nyāya but also on Indian mystical traditions. See his books, *Aurobindo's Philosophy of Brahman* (London: E.J. Brill, 1986), and *Yoga, Karma, and Rebirth: A Brief History and Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

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